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SCIENCE FICTION

DECEMBER 1952

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RING AROUND THE SUN
By Clifford D. Simak

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WHAT'S NEW?

QUITE a bit is new, as you can see with a number of what I hope are astonished glances.

You're probably getting used to our better paper and printing. But we're not. We are busily exploring the possibilities of Offset Lithography and are somewhat intimidated—the process will do just about everything except diaper the baby and walk the dog. And so you'll be seeing experiments in artwork, layout and typography for months to come.

Most of them we expect to be successful, but we also expect to fall on our face with some. Don't hesitate to tell us when we do. But if there's a word of appreciation *and encouragement anywhere in your system, we'd like that, too.

Visually, the most striking thing in this issue is the cover, of course.

The artists are Jack and Bob Strimban and Sam Willig, and the name they have devised for this entirely new technique is "Camerage."

Now let's see how clearly it can be explained. That isn't an easy job, for much of the process can be described only by paradoxical statements.

For example, Camerage is a three-dimensional montage effect

—but it's not a montage. Many photographers do montages; they combine sections of several pictures to make a single complex photograph. That has to be done in the dark room.

Well, Camerage takes the dark room out into the studio. All the objects in the picture are assembled at one time, illuminated by projected colored lights—some with plain gelatins, others with gelatins in abstract shapes—and are shot by a number of cameras placed on different planes.

A panel of rheostats precisely controls the light that each object receives from every one of its sources.

The effect of this is no less than startling. Each object can be made completely opaque, translucent, or absolutely transparent—not just for the camera, but right in front of your eyes!

Once they achieved that, the artists immediately went to work on apparent size. By controlling the amount, direction, color and shape of light, they can increase or decrease the size of each object without moving either it or the cameras a single inch. Again, this effect can be seen with the naked eye.

A photographer can instantly recognize the advantages of the

process. Instead of working by guess and by God in the dark room, he obviously would prefer to have everything visible and under exact control. That's what Camerage allows — photographic orchestration of color, shape and size, since the whole thing is done in one operation rather than many, and in the open studio.

The day of lucky accidents leading to important discoveries is evidently not over, for that's just how Camerage was found. However, the Strimbans and Willing had to put in almost three years of exhaustive experimenting before the cover on this issue could finally be produced.

That's right—this is the first appearance of Camerage.

Using our cover as a sample, the artists quickly acquired orders to go and do likewise for *Vogue*, some large advertising agencies, a product packager—and are negotiating to make a feature-length film with the process.

But you'll be seeing more Camerage covers in future issues of *GALAXY*.

WHAT else is new? Well, an entire covey of writers first breaking into science fiction are coming along wonderfully well. It's impossible to list them all, especially since some haven't even begun to sell yet, though

they will before long.

F. L. Wallace ("Accidental Flight" and "Delay in Transit") is unusual in this profession. A mature engineer on the West Coast, he abruptly decided to become a writer, which he had wanted to be all his life. His first few stories have been so successful that he's thinking of going into it full time. He has a whole volcanic vat of ideas that you'll eventually be seeing in print.

Mark Clifton can match him, though. After 20 years of being a labor consultant, he is writing full time. Remember "Star, Bright?" There'll be more, in collaboration with Alex Apostolides.

Robert Sheckley, aged 23, began his career just a few months ago and has already piled up a spectacular number of sales. Watch him grow in the stories coming up.

Now jolly good news and a bonanza for science fiction lovers overseas—*GALAXY* has a British and Italian edition.

We're proud and delighted to welcome these new readers.

I hope to be able to tell you soon what these editions will be like, their schedule of publication and, for those who like to keep their files complete, the cost of subscribing. These two foreign editions, incidentally, will very likely be only the first of many.

—H. L. GOLD



RING AROUND THE

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

Something was going on, the shabby and dignified old man said warningly. And something was, indeed—a whole series of great benefits that had the world with its back pinned to the wall!

VICKERS got up at an hour outrageous for its earliness because Ann had phoned the night before to tell him about a man in New York that she wanted him to meet.

"I know it breaks into your schedule," she had said, "but I

don't think this is something you can pass up."

"I must, Ann," he'd told her. "I've got the writing going now and I can't let loose."

"But this is the biggest thing that has ever broken. They picked you to talk to first, ahead of



SUN

all the other writers. They think you're the man to do it."

"Publicity."

"This is not publicity."

"Forget it—I won't meet the guy, whoever he is," he had said and hung up before she could argue about it.

He was frying eggs and bacon and making toast and trying to keep one eye on the coffee maker, which was temperamental, when the doorbell rang.

He wrapped his robe around him and headed for the door.

It might be the newsboy. He

Illustrated by SIBLEY

had been out on the regular collection day and the boy probably had seen the light in the kitchen.

Or it might be his neighbor, Horton Flanders, who had moved in a year or so ago and who dropped over to spend an idle hour at the most unexpected and inconvenient times. He was an affable old man and distinguished-looking, although slightly moth-eaten and shabby at the edges, pleasant to talk with and a good companion, but Vickers might have wished that he were more orthodox in his visiting.

It might be the newsboy or it might be Flanders. It could scarcely be anyone else at this early hour.

HE opened the door and a mop-pet stood there, wrapped in a cherry-colored bathrobe and with bunny rabbit slippers on her feet. Her hair was tousled from a night of sleep, but her blue eyes sparkled at him and she gave him a pretty smile.

"Good morning, Mr. Vickers," she said. "I woke up and couldn't go back to sleep and I saw the light on in your kitchen and I thought maybe you was sick."

"I'm all right, Jane," Vickers told her. "I'm just getting breakfast. Maybe you would like to eat with me."

"Oh, yes," said Jane. "I was hoping maybe if you was having

breakfast, you'd ask me to."

"Your mother doesn't know you're here, does she?"

"Mommy and Daddy are asleep. This is the day that Daddy doesn't work and they was out awful late last night. I heard them when they came in and Mommy was telling Daddy that he drank too much and she said she wouldn't go out with him, never again, if he drank that much, and Daddy . . ."

"Jane," said Vickers, firmly, "I don't think your mommy and daddy would like you to be telling this."

"Oh, they don't care. Mommy talks about it all the time. I heard her telling Mrs. Traynor she had half a mind to divorce my daddy. Mr. Vickers, what is divorce?"

"I can't recall ever hearing the word before. Maybe we oughtn't to talk about what your mommy says. And look, you got your slippers all wet crossing the grass."

"It's kind of wet outside. The dew is awful heavy."

"You come in," said Vickers, "and I'll dry your feet, and then we'll have some breakfast and call your mommy so she'll know where you are."

She came in and he closed the door.

"You sit on that chair," he said, "and I'll get a towel. I'm afraid

you might catch cold."

"Mr. Vickers, you aren't married, are you?"

"Why, no. It happens that I'm not."

"Most everyone is married," said Jane. "Most everyone I know. Why aren't you married, Mr. Vickers?"

"I don't rightly know. Never found a girl, I guess."

"There are lots of girls."

"There was a girl," said Vickers. "A long time ago, there was a girl."

It had been years, he realized moodily, since he had remembered. He had forced the years to obscure the memory, to hide it away so that he did not think of it, and if he did think of it, to make it so far away and hazy that he could quit thinking of it.

But here it was again.

There had been a girl and an enchanted valley they had walked in, a springtime valley, he remembered, with the pink of wild crab apple blossoms flaming on the hills and the song of bluebird and of lark soaring in the sky, and there had been a wild spring breeze that ruffled the water and blew along the grass so that the meadow seemed to flow and become a lake with whitecaps rolling on it.

They had walked in the valley and there was no doubt that it was enchanted, for when he had

gone back again, the valley wasn't there—or at least not the same valley. It had been a very different valley.

He had walked there twenty years ago and through all of twenty years he had hidden it away, back in the attic of his mind, yet now it had returned, as fresh and shining as if it had been only yesterday.

"Mr. Vickers," said Jane, "I think your toast is burning."

- II

FTER Jane had gone and he had washed the dishes, he remembered that he had intended for a week or more to call Joe about the mice.

"You got what?" Joe asked when he phoned.

"Mice," said Vickers. "Little animals. They run around the place. You never heard of a house with mice?"

"Now that's funny," said Joe. "A well-built place like yours, it shouldn't have no mice. You want me to come over and get rid of them?"

"I guess you'll have to. I tried traps, but these mice don't go for them. Got a cat a while back and the cat left. Only stayed a day or two."

"That's a funny thing. Cats like places where they can catch a mouse."

"This cat was crazy," said Vickers. "Acted like it was spooked. Walked around on tiptoe."

"Cats is funny animals," Joe confided.

"I'm going down to the city today. Figure you could do it while I'm gone?"

"Sure thing. The exterminating business is kind of slack right now. I'll come over ten o'clock or so."

"I'll leave the front door unlocked," said Vickers.

He hung up the phone and got the paper off the stoop. At his desk, he laid down the paper and picked up the sheaf of manuscript, holding it in his hand, feeling the thickness and the weight of it, as if by its thickness and its weight he might reassure himself that what it held was good, that it was not labor wasted, that it said the many things he wished to say and said them well enough, so that other men and women might read the words and know the naked thought that lay behind the coldness of the print.

He should not waste the day, he told himself. He should stay here and work instead of traipsing off to meet this man his agent wanted him to meet. But Aan had been insistent and had said that it was important, and even when he had told her about the car being in the garage for repairs, she still had insisted that

he come. That story about the car had been a fib, of course, for he knew even as he told her that Eb would have it ready for him to make the trip.

He looked at his watch and saw he had no more than half an hour until Eb's garage would open and half an hour was not worth his while to spend in writing.

HE picked up the paper and went out on the porch to read the morning's news.

He thought about little Jane and what a sweet kid she was and how she'd praised his cooking and chattered on and on.

"You aren't married," Jane had said. "Why aren't you married, Mr. Vickers?"

And he had said, "Once there was a girl. I remember now. Once there was a girl."

Her name had been Kathleen Preston and she had lived in a big brick house that sat up on a hill, a many-columned house with a wide porch and fanlights above the doors—an old house that had been built in the first flush of pioneer optimism, when the country had been new. The house had still stood when the land had failed and washed away in ditches and left the hillsides scarred with gullied yellow clay.

He had been young then, so young that it hurt him now to think of it; so young he could not

understand that a girl who lived in an ancestral home with fan-lights above the doors and a pilastered portico could not seriously consider a boy whose father farmed a wornout farm where the corn grew slight and sickly. Or rather, perhaps, it had been her family that could not consider it, for she also must have been too young to fully understand. Perhaps she had quarreled with her family; perhaps there had been angry words and tears. That was something he had never known. For between that walk down the enchanted valley and the next time he had called, they had bundled her off to a school somewhere in the East and that was the last he had seen or heard of her.

For remembrance sake, he had walked the valley again, alert to catch something that would spell out for him the enchantment of that day he had been with her. But the crab apples had dropped their blossoms and the lark did not sing so well and the enchantment had fled into some never-never land. She had taken the magic with her.

The paper fell out of his lap and he bent to pick it up. Opening it, he saw that the news was following the same drab pattern of all other days.

The latest peace rumor still was going strong and the cold war

still was boiling like dry ice on a hot fire.

The cold war had been going on for years, of course, with crisis after crisis, rumor after rumor, near war always threatening and big war never breaking out, until a cold-war-weary world yawned in the face of the new peace rumors and the crises that were a dime a dozen.

Someone at an obscure college down in Georgia had set a new record at raw egg-gulping and a glamorous movie star was on the verge of changing husbands once again and the steelworkers were threatening to strike.

THREE was a lengthy feature article about missing persons and he read about half of it, all that he wanted to. It seemed that people were constantly dropping out of sight, whole families at a time, and the police throughout the land were getting rather frantic.

There always had been people who had disappeared, the article said, but they had been individuals. Now two or three families would disappear from the same community and two or three from another community and there was no trace of them at all. Usually they were from the poorer brackets. Where individuals had dropped from sight, there had been some reason for it, but in these

cases of mass disappearances there seemed to be no reason beyond poverty and why one would or could disappear because of poverty was something the article writer and the people he had interviewed could not figure out.

There was a headline that read: *More Worlds Than One, Says Savant.*

He read part of the story:

BOSTON, MASS. (AP)—*There may be another Earth just a second ahead of us and another world a second behind us and another world a second behind that one and another world a second behind . . . well, you get the idea.*

A sort of continuous chain of worlds, one behind the other.

That is the theory of Dr. Vincent Aldridge . . .

Vickers let the paper drop to the floor and sat looking out across the garden. There was peace here, in this garden corner of the world, if there were nowhere else. A peace compounded of many things, of golden sunshine and the talk of summer leaves quivering in the wind, of bird and flower and sun dial, of picket fence that needed painting and an old pine tree dying quietly and tranquilly, taking its time to die, being friends with the grass and flowers and other trees all the while it died.

Here there was no rumor and no threat; here was calm acceptance of the fact that time ran on, that winter came and summer,

that Sun would follow Moon and that the life one held was a gift to be cherished rather than a right that one must wrest from other living things.

Vickers glanced at his watch and saw that it was time to go.

III

Eb, the garage man, hitched up his greasy britches and squinted his eyes against the smoke from the cigarette that hung from one corner of his grease-smereed mouth.

"You see, it's this way, Jay," he explained. "I didn't fix your car."

"I was going to the city," said Vickers, "but if my car's not fixed . . ."

"You won't be needing that car any more. Guess that's really why I didn't fix it. Told myself it would be just a waste of money."

"It's not that bad," protested Vickers.

"Sure, it's got lots of miles in it. But you're going to be buying this new *Forever* car."

"*Forever* car? That's a queer name for a car."

"No, it isn't," Eb told him, stubbornly. "It'll really last forever. That's why they call it the *Forever* car, because it lasts forever. Fellow was in here yesterday and told me about it and asked

if I wanted to take it on and I said sure I would and this fellow, he said I was smart to take it on, because, he said, there isn't going to be any other car selling except this Forever car."

"Now wait a minute," said Vickers. "They may call it a Forever car, but that doesn't mean it'll last forever. No car would. Twenty years, maybe, or a lifetime, but not forever."

"That's what this fellow told me. 'Buy one of them,' he says, 'and use it all your life. When you die, will it to your son and when he dies, he can will it to his son, and so on down the line.' It's guaranteed to last forever. Anything goes wrong with it, they'll fix it up or give you a new one. All except the tires. They wear out, just like on any other car. And paint, too. But the paint is guaranteed ten years. If it goes bad sooner than ten years, you get a new job free."

"I don't doubt a car could be made to last longer than the ones do now. But if they were built too well there'd be no replacement. It stands to reason a manufacturer in his right mind wouldn't build a car that would last forever. He'd put himself out of business. In the first place, it would cost too much . . ."

"That's where you're wrong," Eb told him. "You get it complete for fifteen hundred."

"Not much to look at, I suppose."

"It's the classiest job you ever laid your eyes on. Fellow that was here was driving one of them and I looked it over good. Any color you want. Lots of chrome and stainless steel. All the latest gadgets. And drive? Man, that thing drives like a million dollars. But it might take some getting used to it. I want to open the hood to take a look at the motor and, you know, that hood doesn't open. 'What you doing there?' this fellow asked and I told him I wanted to look at the motor. 'There isn't any need to,' this fellow says. 'Nothing ever goes wrong with it. You never need to get at it.' 'But,' I asked him, 'where do you put in the oil?' And you know what he said? Well, sir, he said you don't put in no oil. 'All you put in is gasoline,' he tells me."

"I'll have a dozen or so of them in within a day or so, Jay," said Eb. "You better let me save you one."

VICKERS shook his head. "I'm short on money."

"That's another thing about it. This company gives you good trade-in value. I figure I could give you a thousand for that wreck of yours."

"It's not worth a thousand, Eb."

"I know it's not. Fellow says, 'Give them more than they're worth. Don't worry about what you give them. We'll make it right with you.' It doesn't exactly seem the smart way to do business, but if that's the way they want to operate, I won't say a word against it."

"I'd have to think about it."

"That would leave five hundred for you to pay. I can make it easy on you. Fellow said I should make it easy. Says they aren't so much interested in the money right now as getting a few of them Forever cars out, running on the road."

"I don't like the sound of it," objected Vickers. "Here this company springs up overnight with no announcement at all with a brand-new car. You'd think there would have been something in the papers about it. If I were putting out a new car, I'd plaster the country with advertising . . . big ads in the newspapers, announcements on television, billboards every mile or so."

"Well, you know," said Eb, "I thought of that one, too. I said, 'Look, you fellows want me to sell this car and how am I going to sell it when you aren't advertising it? How am I going to sell it when no one knows about it?' And he said that they figured the car was so good everyone would up and tell everybody else. Said

there isn't any advertising that can beat word of mouth. Said they'd rather save the money for advertising to cut down the cost of the car."

"I can't understand it."

"It does sort of hit you that way," Eb admitted. "This gang that's putting out the Forever car isn't losing any money on it, you can bet your boots on that. Be crazy if they did. And if they aren't losing any money at it, can you imagine what the rest of them companies have been making all these years—two or three thousand for a pile of junk that falls apart second time you take it out?"

"When you get the cars in," said Vickers, "I'll be down to take a look at them. We might make a deal."

"Sure. You say you was going to the city?"

Vickers nodded.

"Be a bus along any minute now," said Eb. "Catch it down at the drugstore corner. Get you there in a couple of hours. Those fellows really wheel it."

"I guess I could take a bus. I never thought of it."

"I'm sorry about the car," said Eb. "If I'd known you was going to use it, I'd have fixed her up. Not much wrong with it. But I wanted to see what you thought about this other deal before I run you up a bill."

THE drugstore corner looked somehow unfamiliar and Vickers puzzled about it as he walked down the street toward it. Then, when he got closer, he saw what it was that was unfamiliar.

Several weeks ago old Hans, the shoe repairman, had taken to his bed and died and the shoe repair shop, which had stood next to the drugstore for almost uncounted years, finally had been closed.

Now it was open again—or, at least, the display window had been washed, something which old Hans in all his years had never bothered to do, and there was a display of some sort.

And there was a sign. Vickers had been so intent in figuring out what was wrong with the finally washed window that he did not see the sign until he was almost even with the store. The sign was new and neatly lettered and it said GADGET SHOP.

Vickers stopped before the window and looked at what was inside. A strip of black velvet had been laid along the display strip and displayed upon it were three items—a cigarette lighter, a razor blade and a single light bulb. Nothing else.

Just those three items. There were no signs, no advertising, no prices. There was no need of any. Anyone who saw that window, Vickers knew, would recognize

the items, although the store would not sell only those. There would be a couple of dozen others, each of them in its own way as distinguished and efficient as the three lying on the strip of velvet.

There was a tapping sound along the walk and Vickers turned when it came close to him. It was his neighbor, Horton Flanders, out for his morning walk, with his slightly shabby, carefully brushed clothes and his smart malacca cane. No one else, Vickers told himself, would have the temerity to carry a cane along the streets of Cliffwood.

Mr. Flanders saluted him with the cane and moved in to stand beside him and stare at the window.

"So they're branching out," he said.

"Apparently," Vickers agreed.

"Peculiar outfit," said Mr. Flanders. "You may know, although I presume you don't, that I have been most interested in this company. Just a matter of curiosity, you understand. I am curious, I might add, about many different things."

"I hadn't noticed."

"Oh, my, yes. About many things. About the carbohydrates, for instance. Most intriguing set-up, don't you think so, Mr. Vickers?"

"I hadn't given it much

thought. I have been so busy that I'm afraid—"

"There's something going on," said Mr. Flanders. "The question is what and why."

The bus came down the street, passed them and braked to a stop at the drugstore corner.

"I'm afraid I'll have to leave you," Vickers said. "I'm going to the city. If I'm back tonight, why don't you drop over?"

"Oh, I will," Mr. Flanders told him. "I nearly always do."

IV

IT had been the blade at first, the razor blade that would not wear out. And after that the lighter that never failed to light, that required no flints and never needed filling. Then the light bulb that would burn forever if it met no accident. Now it was the Forever car and the synthetic carbohydrates.

"There is something going on," Mr. Flanders had said to him, standing there in front of old Hans' shop. "The question is what and why."

Vickers sat in his seat next to the window, well back in the bus.

There was a tie-up somewhere, a common denominator to explain why it should be these five items and not five other things, say roller curtains and pogo sticks and yoyos and airplanes and

toothpaste. Razor blades shaved a man and light bulbs lit his way and a cigarette lighter would light a cigarette and the synthetic carbohydrates had ironed out at least one international crisis and saved some millions of people from starvation or war.

"There is something going on," Flanders had said, standing there in neat, shabby clothes and with that ridiculous stick clutched in his fist, although, come to think of it, it was not ridiculous when Mr. Flanders held it.

The Forever car used no oil and when you died you willed it to your son, and when he died he willed it to his son, and if your great-great-grandfather bought one of the cars and you were the eldest son of the eldest son of the eldest son, you would have it, too. For the car would last forever.

But it would do more than that. It would close every automotive plant in the matter of a year or so. It would shut down most of the garages and repair shops. It would be a blow to the steel industry and the glass industry and the fabric makers and many other industries.

The razor blade hadn't seemed important, nor the light bulb, nor the lighter, but now they suddenly were. Thousands of men would lose their jobs and they would come home and face the family and say: "Well, this is it.

After all these years I haven't got a job."

The family would go about their everyday affairs in tight and terrible silence, with a queer air of dread hanging over them, and the man would buy newspapers, all the newspapers that there were, and would study the want ad columns, then go out and walk the streets and men in little cages or at desks in outer offices would shake their heads at him.

FINALLY the man would go to one of those little places that had the sign "Carbohydrates, Inc." over its door and he would shuffle in embarrassment, the humiliation of a good workman who cannot find a job, and he would say, "I'm a little down on my luck and the cash is running low. I wonder—"

The man behind the desk would say, "Why, sure, how many in your family?" The man would tell him and the one who was at the desk would write on a slip of paper and hand it to him. "That window over there," he'd say. "I figure that's enough to last you for a week, but if it isn't, be sure to come back any time you want to."

The man would take the slip of paper and try to say his thanks, but the carbohydrates man would brush them easily aside and say, "That's what we're here for—

helping guys like you."

The man would go to the window and the man behind the window would look at the slip of paper and hand him packages and one package would be synthetic stuff that tasted like potatoes and another one would taste like bread and there would be others that would make you think you were eating corn or peas.

It wasn't like relief—anyhow, you could say it wasn't. These carbohydrates people didn't insult you when you came to ask for help. They treated you like a paying customer and they always said that you should come back and sometimes when you didn't they came around to see what had happened—if maybe you had got a job or were bashful about coming in again. If it turned out that you were bashful, they'd sit down and talk and before they left they had you thinking you were doing them a favor by taking the carbohydrates off their hands.

Because of the carbohydrates, millions who would have died were still alive in India and in China. Because of carbohydrates, almost every relief office throughout the entire world had been forced to close its doors. People wouldn't go to a relief office to be bullied and humiliated when they could go across the street

and get food from folks who seemed downright glad to see them.

Now the thousands who would lose their jobs would travel the same trail to the door with the carbohydrates sign.

The automotive industry would have to shut down. Why buy any other car when you could walk down the street and get one that would last forever? Just as the razor blade industry had closed its doors when it was possible to buy an everlasting blade at the gadget shops. The same thing had happened with light bulbs and with cigarette lighters and the chances were, Vickers told himself, that the Forever car wasn't the last that would be heard from these manufacturers, whoevers they might be.

Those who made the razor blades also must have made the lighters and the light bulbs, and those who made the gadget items must have designed the Forever car. Not the same companies, perhaps, although he couldn't know, for it had never occurred to him before to try to find out.

THE bus was filling up, but Vickers still sat by himself, staring out the window and sorting out his thoughts.

A couple of women behind him were talking and, without consciously trying to eavesdrop, he

heard what they were saying.

"One of them giggled and said, 'We have the most interesting group. So many interesting people in it.'

And the other woman said, "I been thinking about joining one of those groups, but Charlie says it's all baloney. Says we're living in America in the year 1977 and there's no reason in the world why we should pretend we aren't. Says this is the best country and the best time the world has ever known. Says we got all the modern conveniences and everything. Says we're happier than people ever been before. Says this pretending business is just a lot of communist propaganda and he'd like to get hold of the ones that got it started. Says . . ."

"Oh, I don't know," interrupted the first woman. "It is kind of fun. It takes a lot of work, of course, reading about them old times and all of that, but one fellow was saying at a meeting the other night you get out of it what you put into it and I guess he's right. But I don't seem to be able to put much into it. I must be the flighty type. I'm not too good a reader and I don't understand too well and I got to have a lot explained to me, but there are them who get a lot out of it, seems like. There's a man in our group that is living back in London, back in the times of

a man named Peeps. I don't know who this Peeps was, but I guess he was an important man or something. You don't know who Peeps was, do you, Gladys?"

"Not me," said Gladys.

"Well, anyhow, this fellow talks all the time about this Peeps. He wrote a book, this Peeps, and it must be an awful long book because he tells about so many things. This man I was telling you about writes the most wonderful diary. We always like to have him read it to us. You know, it sounds almost as if he was really living there."

The bus stopped for a railroad crossing and Vickers glanced at his watch. "They'd be in the city in another half an hour.

It was a waste of time, he told himself. No matter what sort of scheme Ann had up her sleeve, it would be a waste of time, for he was not going to allow anything to interrupt his writing. He shouldn't have allowed himself to be talked into wasting even this one day.

Back of him, Gladys was saying, "Did you hear about these new houses they are putting out? I was talking to Charlie about them the other night and I was saying maybe we ought to look into them. Our place is getting kind of shabby, you know, and we will have to paint it and sort of fix it up, but Charlie said no one

would put out them kind of houses on the sort of deal they offer without there was a catch somewhere. Mabel, have you seen any of them houses or read anything about them?"

"I was telling you," Mabel said, "about this group I belong to. One of the fellows is pretending that he's living in the future. Now, I ask you, ain't that a laugh? Imagine anyone pretending he's living in the future . . ."

V

OUTSIDE the door, Ann Carter stopped and said, "Please remember Jay, his name is Crawford. You're not to call him Crawford or Crawham or any other name but Crawford."

Vickers said humbly, "I'll do my very best."

She came close to him and tightened his tie and straightened it and flicked some imaginary dust off his lapel.

"We're going out as soon as this is over and buy you a suit," she said.

"I have a suit."

"Why don't you wear it, then?"

"Why, I am," said Vickers.

The letters on the door said "North American Research."

"What I can't understand," protested Vickers, "is why North American Research and I should have anything in common."

"Money," said Ann. "They have it and you need it."

She opened the door and he followed her in obediently, thinking what a pretty woman she was and how efficient. Too efficient. She knew books and publishers and what the public wanted and she was onto all the angles. She drove herself and everyone around her. She was never so happy as when three telephones were ringing and there were five dozen letters to be answered and a dozen calls to make. She had bullied him into coming here and it was not beyond reason, he told himself, that she had bullied Crawford and North American Research into wanting him to come.

"Miss Carter," said the girl at the desk, "you can go right in. Mr. Crawford is waiting for you."

She's even got the Indian sign on the receptionist, Vickers thought.

VI

GEORGE CRAWFORD was a big man who overflowed the chair in which he sat. He held his hands folded over his paunch and talked with no change of tone, with no inflection whatsoever, and was the stillest man Vickers had ever seen. He sat huge and stolid and his lips scarcely moved and his voice was

not much louder than a whisper.

"I have read some of your work, Mr. Vickers," he said. "I am impressed by it."

"I am glad to hear you say so," Vickers said.

"Three years ago, I never would have thought that I would ever read a piece of fiction or be talking to its author. Now, however, I find that we need a man like you. I have talked it over with my directors and we are all agreed that you are the man who could do the job for us."

He paused and stared at Vickers with bright blue eyes that peered out like bullet points from the folds of flesh.

"Miss Carter," he said, "tells me that, at the moment, you are very busy."

"That is right," said Vickers.

"Some important piece of work, I presume."

"I hope it is."

"This thing I have in mind would be much more important."

"That," Vickers told him crisply, "is a matter of opinion."

"Before we go any further, I would like it understood that what I have to say is of a confidential nature."

"Mr. Crawford, I have little stomach for cloak and dagger business."

"This is not cloak and dagger business," said Crawford and for the first time there was emotion

in his low, quiet voice. "It is the business of a world with its back against the wall. You have heard of the Forever car?"

VICKERS nodded. "The garage owner in my home town tried to sell me one this morning."

"And the everlasting razor blades and the lighter and the light bulbs?"

"I have one of the blades," said Vickers, "and it is the best I ever owned. I doubt that it is everlasting, but it is a good blade and I've never had to sharpen it. When it wears out, I intend to buy another one."

"Unless you lose it, you will never have to. Because, Mr. Vickers, it is an everlasting blade. And the car is an everlasting car. Maybe you've heard about the houses, too."

"Not enough to matter."

"The houses are prefabricated units," said Crawford, "and they sell at the flat rate of five hundred dollars a room—set up. You can trade in your old home on them at a fantastic trade-in value and the credit terms are liberal—much more liberal, I might add, than any sane financing institution would ever allow. They are heated and air-conditioned by a solar plant that tops anything—you hear me, anything—that we have today. There are many other features, but that gives you

something of a rough idea."

"They sound good. We've been talking about low-cost housing for a long time now. Maybe this is it."

"They are a good idea," admitted Crawford. "I would be the last to deny they are. Except that they will ruin the power people. The solar plant supplies it all—heat, light, power. They will put thousands of carpenters and masons and painters out of work and on the carbohydrates lines. They eventually will wreck the lumber industry."

"I can understand about the power angle, but that business about the carpenters and the lumber industry doesn't quite make sense. Surely these houses use lumber and it must take carpenters to build them."

"They use lumber, all right, and someone builds them, but we don't know who it is."

"You could check," suggested Vickers. "There must be a corporate setup. There must be mills and factories somewhere."

THAT THERE'S a company," said Crawford. "A sales company. We started with that and we found the warehouse from which the houses are shipped after they are sold. But that's the end of it. There is, so far as we can find, no factory that builds them. They are consigned from a

certain company and we have its name and address. But no one has ever sold a stick of timber to that company. They have never bought a hinge. They hire no men. They list factory sites and the sites are there, but there aren't any factories. And, to the best of our knowledge, no single person has gone into or come out of the home office address since we've been watching it."

"That's fantastic," Vickers objected.

"Of course it is," agreed Crawford. "Lumber and other materials go into those houses and somewhere there must be men who build them."

"Mr. Crawford, why are you interested?"

"Well, now, I wasn't quite ready to tell you that."

"I know you weren't," said Vickers, "but you'll tell me anyway."

"I had hoped to sketch in a bit more of the background so you would understand what I am driving at. Our interest—I might say our organization—sounds just a little silly until you know the background."

"Someone has you scared. You wouldn't admit it, of course, but you're scared livid."

"Queerly enough, I will admit it. But it's not me, Mr. Vickers—it's industry, the industry of the entire world."

"You think the people who are making and selling these houses," asked Vickers, "are the same ones who are making the Forever car and the lighters and the bulbs?"

Crawford nodded. "And the carbohydrates, too."

"Of course."

"It's terrifying," Crawford said, "when you think about it. Here we have someone who wrecks industries and throws millions out of work, then turns around and offers those same millions the food to live on."

"A political plot?"

"We are convinced that it is a planned attack on world economy—a deliberate effort to undermine the social and economic system of our way of life, and after that, of course, the political system. Our way of life is based on capital, be it private capital or state control of resources and on the wage that the worker earns at his daily job. Take away those two things, capital and jobs, and you have undercut the whole basis of an orderly society."

"We?" asked Vickers. "Who are we?"

"North American Research."

"And North American Research?"

"You're getting interested," said Crawford.

"I want to know who I'm talking to and what you want of me and what it's all about."

CRAWFORD sat for a long time without speaking, and then he finally said, "That is what I meant when I told you what I had to say was highly confidential."

"I will swear no oath," said Vickers, "if that is what you mean."

"Let's go back and review some history. Who we are and what we are will become apparent then.

"You remember the razor blade. It was the first to come out. An everlasting razor blade. The news spread quickly and everyone went out and bought one. Now the ordinary man will get anywhere from one to half a dozen shaves out of a blade. Then he throws it away and puts in another. That means he is a continuous buyer of razor blades. As a result, the razor blade industry employed thousands of workers, it represented a certain profit for thousands of dealers, it was a buyer of steel. In other words, it was an economic factor which, linked with thousands of others, make up the picture of world industry. So what happens?"

"I can tell you that," said Vickers, "although I'm no economist. No one bought any more razor blades. The razor blade industry was out the window."

"Then there was the lighter. A small thing in itself, of course,

but fairly large when you look at it from the world point of view. The same thing happened there. And the everlasting light bulbs. Three industries gone. Mr. Vickers. Three industries wiped out. You said a while ago that I was scared and I told you that I was. It was after the bulbs that we got scared. Because if someone could wipe out three industries, why not half a dozen, a dozen, a hundred—why not all of them?

"We organized, and by we I mean the industry of the world—not American industry alone, but the industry of America and the British commonwealth and the continent of Europe and Russia and all of the rest of them. There were a few, of course, who were skeptical. There still are a few who never have come in, but by and large I can tell you that our organization represents and is backed by every major industry of the entire world. I would prefer you not to mention this."

"At the moment," Vickers told him, "I have no intention of saying anything about it."

"We organized," said Crawford, "and we swung a lot of power, as you can well imagine. We made certain representations and we brought certain pressures and we got a few things done. For one thing, no newspaper, no periodical, no radio station now will ac-

cept advertising for any of the gadgets or give them any mention in the news. For another, no reputable drugstore or any other place of business will sell a razor blade or a bulb or lighter."

"That was when they set up the gadget shops?"

"Exactly," said Crawford.

"They're branching out," said Vickers. "One opened in Cliffwood just the other day."

THEY set up the gadget shops," said Crawford, "and they developed a new form of advertising. They hired thousands of men and women who went around from place to place and said to people they would meet, 'Did you hear about those wonderful new gadgets they are getting out? You haven't? Well, just let me tell you . . .' That is the best kind of advertising there is. But it's more expensive than you can possibly imagine.

"So we knew that we were up against not merely inventive and productive genius, but almost unlimited money as well.

"And we investigated. We tried to find out who they were and how they operated and what they meant to do. As I've told you, we ran into stone walls."

"There might be legal angles," said Vickers.

"We have run down the legal angles. These people, whoever

they may be, are covered from hell to breakfast. Taxes? So there won't be any investigation, they actually pay more taxes than they need to pay. Rules of corporation? They are more than meticulous in meeting all the rules. Social security? They pay it on huge payrolls that we are convinced are utterly fictitious, but you can't go to the social security people and say, 'Look, there aren't any such people as these they're paying for.' There are other points, but those serve as illustrations. We've run down so many legal blind alleys that our legal force is dizzy."

"Mr. Crawford," said Vickers, "you make out a most interesting case, but I can't see the point of what you said earlier. You said this was a conspiracy to break world industry. If you study your economic history, you will find example on example of cutthroat competition. That's all this is."

"You forget," Crawford replied, "about the carbohydrates."

AND that was true, thought Vickers. The carbohydrates had no place in mere cutthroat competition.

"We checked into them," Crawford said. "So far as we're concerned, the carbohydrates aren't being manufactured—they simply exist. They are shipped to the distribution offices from several

warehouses and none of the warehouses are big enough to carry more than a day or two's supply. We can find no factories and we can't trace transportation—oh, sure, from the warehouses to the distribution points, but not from anywhere to the warehouses. It's like the old story that Hawthorne told about the pitcher of milk that never ran dry."

"What happens when the men who are out of work need more than just a gift of food?" asked Vickers. "What happens when their families are in tatters and they need clothes and they're thrown out into the street?"

"I think I can answer that. Some other philanthropic society will spring up overnight and will furnish clothes and shelter. They're selling houses now for five hundred a room, which is no more than token payment. Why not give them away? Why not clothing that will cost no more than a tenth or a twentieth of what you pay today. A suit for five dollars, say, or a dress for fifty cents."

"You have no idea of what is coming next?"

"We've tried to dope it out," said Crawford. "We figured the car would come quickly, and it did. We figured houses, too, and they have put them out. Clothing should be one of the next items to go on the market."

"Food, shelter, transportation, clothing," said Vickers. "Those are four basics."

"They also have fuel and power," Crawford added.

"But who is it? You've told me you don't know, but you must have some idea, some educated guess."

"Not an inkling. We have tables of organization for their corporation setups. We can't find the men themselves; they are names we've never heard of."

"Russia?"

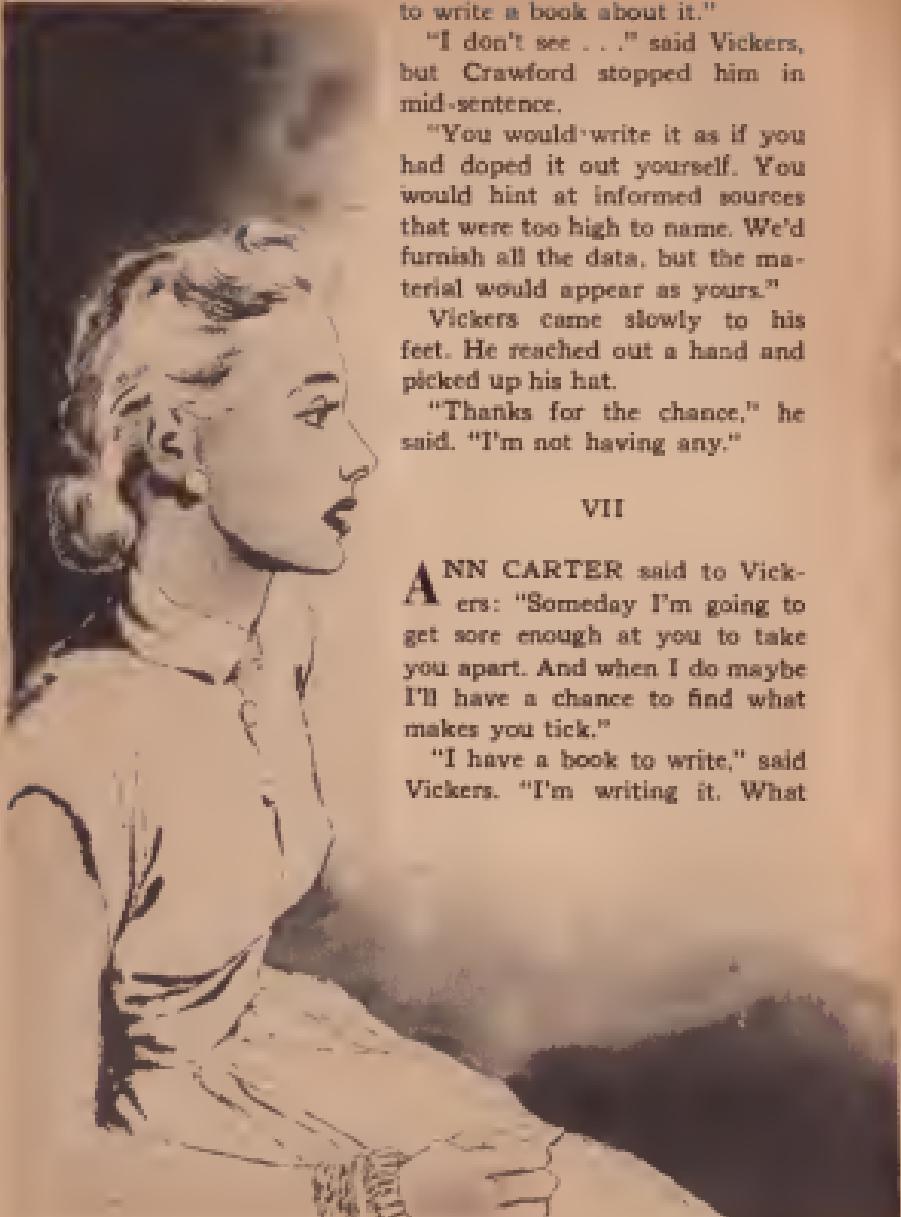
Crawford shook his head. "Russia is cooperating. That should prove how scared they are."

For the first time, Crawford moved. He unfolded his hands from across his paunch, grasped the arms of his massive chair and pulled himself straight, sitting upright now.

"I suppose," he said, "that you are wondering where you fit in on this."

"Naturally."

"We can't say, 'here we are, a combine of the world's industrial might, fighting to protect your way of life.' We can't explain to the people what the situation is. They'd laugh at us. After all, you can't tell them that a car that will last forever or a house that costs only five hundred a room is a bad thing for them. We can't tell them anything and yet this needs telling. We want you



to write a book about it."

"I don't see . . ." said Vickers, but Crawford stopped him in mid-sentence.

"You would write it as if you had doped it out yourself. You would hint at informed sources that were too high to name. We'd furnish all the data, but the material would appear as yours."

Vickers came slowly to his feet. He reached out a hand and picked up his hat.

"Thanks for the chance," he said. "I'm not having any."

VII

ANN CARTER said to Vickers: "Someday I'm going to get sore enough at you to take you apart. And when I do maybe I'll have a chance to find what makes you tick."

"I have a book to write," said Vickers. "I'm writing it. What

more do you want?"

"That book could keep. You could write it anytime."

"Go ahead, tell me I threw away a million bucks. That's what you're thinking."

"You could have charged them a fancy fee for writing and gotten a contract with the publisher like there never was before . . ."

"And pushed aside the greatest piece of work I've ever done," said Vickers, "and come back to it cold and find I'd lost the feel."

"Every book you write is your greatest one. You're nothing but a literary ham. Sure, you do good work and your darn books sell, although sometimes I wonder why, but if there were no money



in it, you'd never write another word. Tell me, honest, why do you write?"

"You've answered it for me. You say it is for money. All right, so it is for money."

"All right, so I have a sordid soul."

"My God, we're fighting as if we're married!"

"That's another thing. You've never married, Jay. It's an index of your selfishness. I bet you never even thought of it."

"Once I did," said Vickers. "Once long ago."

"Here, put your head down here and have a good long cry. I bet it was pitiful. I bet that's how you get some of those excruciating love scenes you put into your books."

"Ann, you're getting maudlin drunk."

"If I'm getting drunk, you're the man who drove me to it. Thanks for the chance, but I'm not having any."

"I had a hunch there was something phony there," insisted Vickers.

"That was you," Ann retorted.

She finished off her drink.

"Don't use a hunch," she said, "to duck the responsibility of turning down the best thing you ever had. Anytime someone dangles money like that in front of me, I'm not letting any hunch stand in my way."

"I'm sure you wouldn't," Vickers agreed.

"That was a nasty thing to say," Ann told him. "Pay for the drinks and let's get out of here. I'm putting you on that bus and don't you come back here again."

VIII

THE huge sign was draped diagonally across the front of the huge show window. It read:

HOUSES
TAILORED TO ORDER
\$500 a room
LIBERAL TRADE-IN
ON YOUR OLD HOME

In the window was a five or six room house, set in the middle of a small, beautifully planned lawn and garden. There was a sun dial in the garden and a cupola with a flying duck weather vane on the attached garage. Two white lawn chairs and a white round table stood on the clipped grass and there was a new and shiny car standing in the driveway.

Ann squeezed Vickers' arm. "Let's go in."

"This must be what Crawford was talking about," said Vickers.

"You got lots of time to catch the bus and we could have a look."

"We might as well. If you get

interested in looking at a house, you won't be chewing me."

"If I thought it were possible, I'd trap and marry you."

"And make my life a hell."

"Why, certainly," Ann told him sweetly. "Why else would I do it?"

The door swung to behind them and the noise of the street was shut away and they walked on the deep green carpeting that doubled as a lawn.

A salesman saw them and came over.

"We were just passing by," said Ann, "and we thought we would drop in. It looks like a fine house and . . ."

"It is a fine house," the salesman assured them, "and it has many special features."

"Is that true what the sign said?" asked Vickers. "Five hundred dollars a room?"

"Everyone asks me that. They read the sign, but they don't believe it, so the first thing they ask me when they come in is whether it is really true that we sell these houses for five hundred a room."

"Well, is it?" persisted Vickers.

"Absolutely," said the salesman. "A five room house is twenty-five hundred dollars and a ten room house would be five thousand dollars. Most people, of course, aren't interested in a ten room house at first."

"What do you mean, at first?"

"Well, this is what you might call a house that grows. You buy a five room house, say, and in a little while you figure that you want another room, so we come out and redesign the house and make it a six room house."

"Isn't that expensive?" Ann asked.

"Oh, not at all," the salesman said. "It only costs you five hundred dollars for the extra room. That is a flat and standard charge."

"This is a prefabricated house, isn't it?" asked Ann.

"I suppose you could call it that, although it does the house injustice. When you say 'prefabricated' you are thinking of a house that is pre-cut and sort of stuck together. Takes a week or ten days to put it together and then you just have a shell—no heating plant, no fireplace, nothing."

"I'm interested in this extra room angle," said Vickers. "You say that when they want an extra room, they just tell you up and you come out and stick one on."

THE salesman stiffened slightly.

"We stick nothing on. At all times, your house is well planned and practical, designed in accordance with the highest scientific and esthetic concepts of what a

home should be. In some cases, adding another room means that we have to change the whole house around, rearrange the rooms and such. If you wanted to change the place completely, the best thing might be to trade the house in on a new one. For doing that, we make a service charge of one per cent per year of the original cost, plus, of course, the charge for the extra rooms."

He looked at the two of them hopefully. "You have a house, perhaps?"

"A little cottage up the valley," said Vickers. "It's not much of a place."

"Worth how much, would you say?"

"Fifteen or twenty thousand, but I doubt if I could get that much."

"We'd give you twenty thousand," said the salesman, "subject to appraisal. Our appraisals are most liberal."

"Look," Vickers objected, "I'd only want a five or six room house. That would come to twenty five hundred or three thousand."

"We'd pay the difference in cash."

"It doesn't make sense!"

"We're willing to pay the going market value on existing homes in order to introduce our own. In your case, we'd pay you the difference, then take your old place

and move it away and set up the new one. It's as simple as that."

Ann said to Vickers, "Go ahead and tell the man that you aren't having any. This sounds like a good sound business proposition to me, so you'll naturally turn it down."

"Madam," said the salesman, "I don't quite understand."

"It's just a private joke," Vickers interpreted.

"Oh . . . Well, I was telling you that this house has some special features."

"Go ahead, please," said Ann. "Tell us about them."

"Very happy to. For instance, there is the solar plant. You do know what a solar plant is?"

Vickers nodded. "A power plant operated by the Sun."

"Exactly," said the salesman. "This plant, however, is somewhat more efficient than the usual solar plant. It not only heats the house in winter, but supplies electrical power for the year round. It eliminates the necessity of relying upon a public utility for your power. I might add there is much more than you will ever need."

"A nice feature," said Ann.

"Then," continued the salesman, "it comes fully equipped. You get a refrigerator and a deep freeze, an automatic washer and drier, a dish washer, a garbage disposal unit, a toaster, a waffle iron, radio, television, and other

odds and ends."

"An extra charge for them, of course," said Vickers.

"Positively not. All you pay is five hundred a room."

"And beds?" asked Ann. "Chairs and stuff like that?"

"I'm sorry," said the salesman. "You have to furnish those yourself."

"There is an extra charge," Vickers pushed on, "for carting away the old house and putting up the new one."

DRAWING himself erect, the salesman spoke with quiet dignity. "There are no hidden costs. You buy the house and pay—or arrange to pay—at the rate of five hundred a room. We have trained crews of workmen who move away your old house and erect the new one. All of that is included in the original cost. Some buyers want to change location. In that case we are usually able to work out an acceptable exchange plan between their old real estate and the new location they select. You, I presume, would want to stay where you are. You said you were up the valley. A most attractive place."

"Well, I don't know," said Vickers.

"I forgot to mention one thing," the salesman went on. "You never have to paint this house. It is built of material that is of the

same color all the way through and never wears off or fades. We have a wide range of very attractive color combinations."

"We don't want to take up too much of your time," said Vickers. "You see, we're not really customers. We just dropped in."

"But you have a house?"

"Yes, I have a house."

"And we stand ready to replace it with a new one and pay you a comfortable sum besides."

"I know all that," said Vickers, "but . . ."

"It seems to me," the salesman said, "that you should be trying to sell me instead of me trying to sell you."

"I have a house and I like it. How would I know I'd like one of these new houses?"

"Why, sir, I've just been telling you—"

"I'm used to my house. I'm acquainted with it and it's got used to me. I've become attached to it—"

"Jay Vickers," said Ann, "you can't become attached to a house in only three years. To hear you talk about it, one would think you'd lived all your life in an old ancestral home."

"I have the feel of it," Vickers stated obstinately. "I know the place. There is a creaky board in the dining room and I step on it on purpose at times just to hear it creak. And there's a pair

of robins that have a nest in the vine on the porch and there's a cricket in the basement. I've hunted for that cricket, but I never could find him; he was too smart for me. And now I wouldn't touch him if I could, because he is a part of the house and—"

"You'd never be bothered with crickets in one of our houses. They have bug repellent built right into them. You never are bothered with mosquitoes or ants or crickets or anything of the sort."

BUT I'm not bothered with this cricket," said Vickers. "That is what I was trying to tell you. I like it. I'm not sure I'd like a house where a cricket couldn't live. Now, mice, that's a little different."

"I dare say," declared the salesman, "that you would not have mice in one of our houses."

"I won't have any in mine, either. I called the exterminator and they'll be gone by the time I get home."

"Well, now," the salesman said, "there is something else to consider in connection with our house. We put them up in one day's time. You give us an order tonight and by tomorrow night you can move in. And if, for some reason or other, you move to another city or another part of the country, we will undertake to

move your house for you. With our houses there is no need to go through the ordeal of selling the old house, moving to your new location and then spending weeks, if not months, hunting for the kind of house you want to buy. You move your house right along with you, like your briefcase or your golf clubs.

"Let's say you aren't moving to another city. Maybe you just get dissatisfied with the location that you have. You want to move out to the country or to another section of the city. Pick out the place you want to go and let us know. Give us twenty-four hours and we'll move the house for you."

"I suppose," said Ann, "it costs a lot to have the house moved."

"Not at all," the salesman answered. "One per cent of the purchase price, that's all. In the case of a five room house, that would be twenty-five dollars."

"But suppose it was clear across the country . . ."

"It makes no difference," said the salesman. "We make money on some, lose on others. In the end, we even out."

"One thing is bothering me," said Ann. "You remember all that equipment you mentioned, the washer and refrigerator and television and . . .?"

"Yes, certainly."

"But you didn't even once

happen to mention a stove."

"Didn't I?" asked the salesman. "Now how could I have let it slip my mind? Of course you get a stove."

IX

WHEN the bus reached Cliffwood, darkness was beginning to fall. Vickers bought a paper at the corner drugstore and made his way across the street to the town's one clean cafe.

He had ordered the meal and was just starting on the paper when a piping voice hailed him.

"Hi there, Mr. Vickers."

Vickers put down the paper and looked up. It was Jane, the moppet who had come for breakfast.

"Why, hello, Jane," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Me and Mommy came down to buy some ice cream for supper," Jane explained. She perched herself on the edge of the chair across the table from him. "Where you been today, Mr. Vickers? I came across to see you, but there was a man there and he wouldn't let me in. He said he was killing mice. What was he killing mice for, Mr. Vickers?"

"Jane," a voice said.

Vickers looked up and a woman stood there, sleek and maturely beautiful, and she smiled at him.

"You must not mind her, Mr. Vickers," she said.

"I don't. I think she's wonderful."

"I'm Mrs. Leslie," said the woman. "Jane's mother. We've been neighbors for a long time now, but we've never met."

She sat down at the table.

"I've read some of your books," she said, "and they are splendid. I haven't read them all. One has so little time."

"Thank you, Mrs. Leslie," said Vickers, and wondered if she would think that he was thanking her for not reading all his books.

"I had meant to come over and see you. Some of us are organizing a Pretensionist club and I have you on my list."

Vickers shook his head. "I am always pressed for time. I make it a rule to belong to no organization."

"But this," said Mrs. Leslie, "would be—well, you might say this would be down your alley."

"I am glad you thought of me."

She laughed at him. "You think us foolish, Mr. Vickers."

"No," he said, "not foolish."

"Infantile, then."

"Since you supplied the word," said Vickers, "I must admit it does seem somewhat infantile."

NOW, he thought, I've done it.

She will twist it around so that it will appear it was I, not

she, who said it. She'll tell all the neighbors how I told her to her face the club was infatible.

But she didn't seem insulted. "It must seem that way to someone like you who has every minute filled. But I think it might be a wonderful way to work up an interest—an outside interest, that is."

"I have no doubt of it," said Vickers.

"It's a lot of work, I understand. You decide on the period you'd like to pretend you are living in. Then you must read up on the period and write your diary and it must be a full account of each day's activities and not just a sentence or two. You must make it interesting and, if you can, exciting."

"There are many periods of history that could be made exciting."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Mrs. Leslie replied eagerly. "Would you tell me one? If you were going to choose a period for excitement, which would you choose?"

"I'm sorry," Vickers said. "I'd have to think about it."

"But I just heard you say there were many . . ."

"I know. And yet, when I think of it, the present day might prove as exciting as any of the others."

"But there's nothing going on!"

"There's too much going on,"

said Vickers.

The whole idea was pitiful, of course—grown people pretending they lived in some other age, publicly confessing that they could not live at peace with their own age, but must go burrowing back through time to find the musty thrill of vicarious existence. It marked some rankling failure in the lives of these people, some terrible emptiness that would not let them be, some screaming vacuum that somehow had to be filled.

HE remembered the two women who had talked in the bus seat behind him and he wondered momentarily what illusory satisfaction the Pretensionist living back in Pepys' time might get out of it. There was, of course, Pepys' well filled life, the scurrying about, the meetings with many people, the little taverns where there were cheese and wine, the theatres, the good companionship and the midnight talks, the many interests that had kept Pepys as naturally full of life as these Pretensionists were empty.

The movement itself was escapism, obviously, but escapism from what? From insecurity, perhaps. From a daily, ever-present tension that never quite bubbled into fear, yet never quieted into peace. The state, perhaps, of never being sure—a state of mind

for which all the advantages of a highly advanced technology could not compensate.

"They must have our ice cream packed by now," said Mrs. Leslie, gathering up her gloves and purse. "You must come over, Mr. Vickers, and spend an evening with us."

Vickers rose with her. "Some evening very soon," he promised.

He knew he wouldn't and he knew she didn't want him to, but they both paid lip service to the old fable of hospitality.

"Come along, Jane," said Mrs. Leslie. "It was nice to meet you, Mr. Vickers, after all these years."

Without waiting for his answer, she moved away.

"Everything is fine at our house now," said Jane. "Mommy and Daddy have made up again."

"I'm glad of that," said Vickers.

"Daddy says he won't run around with women no more."

"I'm glad to hear that, too."

Her mother called to her across the store.

"I got to go now," said Jane. She slipped off the chair and ran to her mother's side. She turned and waved at him as they went out the door.

Poor kid, he thought, what a life she has ahead of her. If I had a little girl like that—he shut the thought away. There was no little

girl for him. There was a shelf of books and the manuscript that lay waiting for him; not much to build a life on.

That was the trouble with not himself alone, but with everyone —no one seemed now to have too much on which to build a life. For years the world had lived with war or the threat of war. First it had been a frantic feeling, a running to escape, and then it was just a moral and mental numbness that one didn't even notice, a condition that one accepted as the normal way of life.

No wonder there were Pretensionists. With his books and manuscripts, he was one himself.

HE looked under the flower pot in the corner of the stoop to find the key, but there was none, and then he remembered that he had left the house unlocked so that Joe could come in and get rid of the mice.

He turned the knob and went in and made his way across the room to turn on the desk lamp. A white square of paper with awkward pencil scrawls upon it lay underneath the lamp.

Jay: I did the job, then came back and opened up the windows to clean out the smell. I'll give you a hundred bucks a throw for every noose you find, Joe.

A noise brought him around

from the desk and he saw that there was someone on the porch, sitting in his favorite chair, rocking back and forth, a cigarette making a little wavy line dancing in the dark.

"It's I," said Morton Flanders. "Have you had anything to eat?"

"I grabbed a meal in the village."

"That's a pity. I brought over a tray of sandwiches and some beer. I thought you might be hungry and I know how you hate to cook . . ."

"Thanks," said Vickers. "I'm not hungry now. We can have them later."

He threw his hat on a chair and went out to the porch.

"I have your chair," said Mr. Flanders.

"Keep it," Vickers said. "This one is just as comfortable."

"Did you notice if there was any news today? I have a most deplorable habit, at times, of not looking at the papers."

"The same old thing. Another peace rumor that no one quite believes."

"Has it ever occurred to you, Mr. Vickers, that there have been a dozen times at least when there should have been real war, but somehow or other it has never come to be?"

"I hadn't thought of it."

"But it's the truth," said Mr. Flanders. "First there was the

Berlin airlift trouble and the fighting in Greece. Either one of them could have set off a full scale war, but each of them was settled. Then there was Korea and that was settled, too. Iran later threatened to blow up the world, but we got safely past it. Then there were the Manila incidents and the flareup in Alaska and the Indian crisis and half a dozen others. But all of them were settled, one way or another."

"No one really wants to fight," said Vickers.

"Perhaps not, but it takes more than just the desire for peace to prevent a war. Time and again major nations have climbed so far out on a limb that they had to fight or back up. They always have backed up. That isn't human nature, Mr. Vickers, or at least it wasn't human nature until thirty years ago. Does it seem to you that something might have happened, some unknown factor, some new equation, that may account for it?"

"I don't see how there could be any new factor. The human race is still the human race. It's always fought before. Thirty years ago it had just finished the greatest war that ever had been fought."

"Since then, there has been provocation after provocation and there have been regional wars, but the world has not gone to

war. Can you tell me why?"

"No, I can't."

"I HAVE thought about it," said Mr. Flanders, "in an idle way, of course. And it seems to me that there must be some new factor."

"Fear, perhaps," suggested Vickers. "Fear of our frightful weapons."

"That might be it, but fear is a funny thing. It is just as apt to start a war as it is to hold one off, make a people go out and fight to be rid of fear—willing to go against the fear itself to be rid of it. I don't think, Mr. Vickers, that fear alone can account for peace."

"Then what factor do you think it might be?"

"Intervention," Mr. Flanders said.

"Intervention! Who would intervene?"

"I really couldn't say. But the thought is not a new one to me and not in this respect alone. Starting about 80 years or so ago, something happened to the world. Up until that time, Man had stumbled along pretty much in the same old ruts. There had been some progress here and there, some changes, but not very many of them. Not many changes in thinking especially, and that is what really counts.

"Then mankind, which had

been shambling along, broke into a gallop. The automobile was invented and the telephone and motion pictures and flying machine. There was the radio and all the other gadgetry that characterized the first quarter of the century.

"But that was largely mechanics, putting two and two together and having four come out. In the second quarter of the century, classical physics was largely displaced by a new kind of thinking, which admitted that it didn't know when it came face to face with the atoms and electrons. And out of that came theories and the physics of the atom and all the probabilities that today still are probabilities.

"And that, I think, was the greatest stride of all—that the physicists who had fashioned neat cubicles of knowledge and had classified and assigned all the classical knowledge to fit into them snugly should have had the courage to say they didn't know what made electrons behave the way they do."

"You're trying to say," Vickers put in, "that something happened to whip Man out of his rut. But it wasn't the first time a thing like that had happened. Before it there had been the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution."

"I did not say it was the only time it had ever happened." Mr.

Flanders told him. "I merely said it happened. The fact that it had happened before, in a slightly different manner, should prove that it is not an accident, but some sort of cycle, some sort of influence which is operative within the human race. What is it that kicks a plodding culture out of a shuffle into a full-fledged gallop and, in this case at least, keeps it galloping for almost a hundred years without a sign of slackening?"

"You said intervention. You're off on some wild fantasy. Men from Mars, maybe?"

Mr. Flanders shook his head. "Let's be a little more general." He waved his cigarette at the sky above the hedge and trees, with its many stars twinkling in the night. "Out there must be great reservoirs of knowledge. At many points in all that space beyond our Earth there must be thinking beings and they would create knowledge that we had never dreamed of. Some of it might be applicable to humans and to Earth and much of it would not."

"You're suggesting that someone in another solar system—"

"No," said Mr. Flanders. "I'm suggesting that the knowledge is there and waiting, waiting for us to go out and get it."

"We haven't even reached the Moon yet."

"We may not need to wait for

rockets. We might reach out with our minds . . ."

"Telepathy?"

"Maybe that is the word for it. A mind probing out and searching—a mind reaching out for a mind. If there is such a thing as telepathy, distance should be no barrier. A half a mile or half across the Universe, what would be the difference? For the mind is not a physical property; it is not bound, or should not be bound, by the laws that say that nothing can exceed the speed of light."

Vickers laughed uneasily, feeling the slow crawl of invisible, many-footed creatures moving on his neck.

"You can't be serious," he said.

"Perhaps I'm not," admitted Mr. Flanders. "Perhaps I'm an old eccentric who has found a man who will listen to him and will not laugh too much."

"But this knowledge that you talk of. There is no evidence that it exists or that it ever could be applied. It would be alien. It would involve alien logic and apply to alien problems and it would be based on alien concepts that we could not understand."

"Much of it would. There would be much chaff, but you would find some kernels. You might find, for instance, a way in which friction could be eliminated and if you found that you would

have machines that would last forever and you would have—”

“Wait a minute,” snapped Vickers, tensely. “What are you getting at? What about this business of machines that would run forever? We have that already. I was talking to Eb just this morning and he was telling me—”

“About a car. That, Mr. Vickers, is one of the things I was talking about.”

XI

FOR a long time after Mr. Flanders left, Vickers sat on the porch, smoked his cigarettes and stared at the patch of sky he could see between the top of the hedge and the porch's roof . . . at the sky and its crystal wash of stars, thinking that one could not sense the distance and the time that lay between the stars.

Flanders was an old man with a shabby coat and a polished stick and a queer, stilted way of talking that made you think of another era and another culture. What could he possibly know of knowledge in the stars?

He had thought of it, he'd said, in an idle way. And that, Vickers realized, was the way it was—an eccentric with nothing on his mind except the idle speculations that took his mind off an old and faded life that he wanted to forget.

And there, thought Vickers, I am speculating, too, for there's no way that I can know the kind of life the old man may have led.

He got up and went into the living room. He pulled the chair out from his desk and sat down and stared at the typewriter sitting there, accusing him of an entire wasted day, pointing silently at the pile of manuscript that should have been a little thicker if he had stayed at home.

He picked up a few pages of the manuscript and tried to read, but he had no interest and he was gripped by the terrifying thought that he had gone cold.

He had said no, he wasn't interested in writing Crawford's book, and he had said it because he wasn't interested. And yet that had not been the only factor; there had been something else. Hunch, he had told Ann, and she had scoffed at him. But there had been a hunch—that and a feeling of danger and of fear, as if a second self had been standing at his side, warning him away.

It was illogical, of course, for there was no reason why he should have had a sense of fear. He could have used the money. Ann could have used the fee. And yet, without an instant's hesitation, he had refused the offer.

He put the sheets of manuscript back on top of the pile, rose from the chair and pushed it flush



against the desk.

As if the whisper of the chair sliding on the carpeting might have been a signal, a scurrying sound came out of one darkened corner and traveled to the next and then was still with a deathly stillness that was unnatural, as if the whole house might be waiting for whatever happened next.

SLOWLY, Vickers turned around to face the room, pivoting his body with an exaggerated, almost ridiculous effort to be quiet, to get turned around so he could face the corner from



which the sound had come without anything knowing he had turned.

There were no mice. Joe had come up, while he was in the city, and had killed the mice. There should be no scurrying from one corner to the next. Joe had left a note which even now still lay beneath the desk lamp saying that he would pay one hundred bucks a throw for every mouse that Vickers could produce.

The silence hung, not so much a silence as a quietness, as if everything was waiting without breathing.

Moving only his eyeballs, for it seemed that if he turned his head his neck would creak and betray him to whatever danger there might be, Vickers examined the room, the darkened areas in the corners and underneath the furniture and in the shadowed places that were farthest from the light. Cautiously he put his hands behind him, to grasp the desk edge, to get hold of something that was solid so that he did not stand so agonizingly alone, transfixed in the room.

The fingers of his right hand touched something that was metallic and he knew it was the metal paperweight that he had lifted off the pile of manuscripts when he had sat down at the desk. His fingers reached out and grasped it and dragged it for-

ward into the hollow of his hand and he closed his fingers on it and he had a weapon.

There was something in the corner by the yellow chair and although it seemed to have no eyes, he knew it was watching him. It didn't know that he had spotted it, or it didn't seem to know.

"Now!" said Vickers.

His right arm swung up and over and followed through and the paperweight, turning end for end, crashed into the corner.

There was a crunching sound and the noise of metallic parts rolling on the floor.

XII

THREE



mass of wiring that was bent and broken, and crystal disks that were chipped and splintered, and the metallic outer shell that had held the tubes and wiring and the disks and the many other pieces of mechanical mystery that he did not recognize.

Vickers pulled the desk lamp closer to him, so that the light might shine down upon the handful of parts he had gathered from the floor and he put out a finger and stirred it among them, gingerly, listening to the tinkling sounds they made as they clinked together.

No mouse, but something else—something that scuttled in the night, knowing that he would think it was a mouse; a thing that had scared the cat which knew it was no mouse, and a thing that would not be attracted to traps.

An electronic spy, he speculated, a scuttling, scurrying, listening device that watched his every moment, that stored what it heard and saw for future reference or transmitted directly the knowledge that it gained. But direct to whom? And why? If it were a spying device, it would be made so well, so cleverly that it would be able not only to observe him, but to keep out of sight itself. To have any value, it must keep its presence undetected. There would have been no careless moment. It would not have

been seen unless it wanted itself to be seen.

Unless it wanted itself to be seen?

He had been sitting at the desk and had gotten up and pushed the chair flush with the desk and it had been then that he had heard the scampering. If it had not run, he never would have seen it. And it need not have run, for the room was in shadow, with only the desk lamp burning, and his back had been toward the room.

The cold certainty came to him that it had wanted to be seen, that it had wanted to be trapped in a corner and crushed with a paperweight—that it had run deliberately to call his attention to it and that once he'd seen it, it had not tried to get away.

He sat at the desk and perspiration chilled his forehead.

It had wanted to be seen. It had wanted him to know.

Not it, of course, but whoever or whatever it was that had caused the contraption to be placed inside his house. For months it had scampered and scurried like a mouse, had listened and watched, and now the scampering and the watching had come to an end and it was time for something else; time to serve notice on him that he was being watched.

But why and who?

HE fought down the cold, screaming panic that rose inside of him, forced himself to stay sitting in the chair.

There was a clue somewhere in this very day, he thought, if he could recognize it. Something happened today that made the someone behind the watcher decide it was time to let him know.

He ticked off the day's events, marshaling them in his mind as they might be written in a notebook:

The moppet who had come to breakfast.

The remembrance of a walk that he had taken twenty years before.

The story in the paper about more worlds than one.

The Forever car.

The women who had talked in the seat behind him on the bus, and Mrs. Leslie and the club she was organizing.

Crawford and his story of a world with its back against the wall.

The houses at five hundred a room.

Mr. Flanders sitting on the porch and saying that there was a new-found factor which kept the world from war.

The mouse that was not a mouse.

But that wasn't all, of course; somewhere there was something else that he had forgotten. With-

out knowing how he knew it, he was aware that he had forgotten some other fact that should be inserted in the list of things that had happened in the day.

There was Flanders saying that he was interested in the setup of the gadget shops and that he was intrigued by the riddle of the carbohydrates and that he was convinced there was something going on.

And later in the day he had sat on the porch and talked of reservoirs of knowledge in the stars and of a factor which kept the world from war and of another factor which had whipped Man out of his rut almost a hundred years ago and had kept him at the gallop ever since.

He had speculated about these matters in an idle way, he had said.

But was his speculation idle?

Or did Flanders know more than he was telling?

And if he knew, what then?

Vickers shoved back the chair and got to his feet.

He looked at the time. It was almost two o'clock.

No matter, he thought. It's time that I find out, even if I have to break into his house and jerk him out of bed, screaming in his nightshirt.

He was sure that Flanders would wear a nightshirt instead of pajamas.

LONG before he reached Flanders' house, Vickers saw that there was something wrong. The place was lighted up from basement to garret. Men with lanterns were walking about the yards and there were other knots of men who stood around and talked, while all along the street women and children stood off the porches in hastily snatched-up robes. As if, Vickers thought, they were waiting for a strange three A.M. parade that might at any moment come winding down the street.

A group of men were standing by the gate and as he turned in, he saw there were some he knew. There was Eb, the garage man, and Joe, the exterminator man, and Vic, who ran the drugstore.

"Hello, Jay," said Eb, "we're glad you are here."

"Hello, Jay," said Joe.

"What's going on?" asked Vickers.

"Old Man Flanders," said Vic, "has disappeared."

"His housekeeper got up in the night to give him some medicine," said Eb, "and found he wasn't there. She looked around for him for a while and then she went to get some help."

"You've searched for him?" asked Vickers.

"Around the place," said Eb.

"But we're going to start branching out now. We'll have to organize and get some system in it."

The drugstore owner said, "We thought at first maybe he'd been up during the night wandering around the house or out into the yard and might have had a seizure of one kind or another. So we looked near at hand at first."

"We've gone over the house," said Joe, "from top to bottom and we've combed the yard and there ain't hide nor hair of him."

"Maybe he went for a walk," Vickers offered.

"No man in his right mind," declared Joe, "goes walking after midnight."

"He wasn't in his right mind, if you ask me," said Eb. "Not that I didn't like him. I did. Never saw a more mannerly old codger in all my born days, but he had funny ways about him."

Someone with a lantern came down the brick-paved walk.

"You men ready to get organized?" asked the man with the lantern.

"Sure, Sheriff," said Eb. "Any time you are. We just been waiting for you to get it figured out."

"Well," said the sheriff, "there ain't much that we can do until it gets light, but I thought we might take some quick scouts out around. Some of the other boys are going to cover the town, go

up and down all the streets and alleys, and I figured maybe some of you might like to have a look along the river."

"That's all right with us," said Eb. "You just tell us what you want us to do."

THE sheriff lifted his lantern to shoulder height and looked at them. "Jay Vickers, ain't it? Glad you joined us, Jay. We need all the men there are."

Vickers lied, without knowing why he lied: "I heard some commotion going on."

"Guess you knew the old gent pretty well," said the sheriff. "Better than the most of us."

"He used to come over and talk to me almost every day."

"I know. We remarked about it. He never talked much to no one else."

"We had some common interests," Vickers said, "and I think that he was lonely."

"The housekeeper said he went over to see you last night."

"Yes, he did," said Vickers. "He left shortly after midnight."

"Notice anything unusual about him? Any difference in the way he talked?"

"Now, look here, Sheriff," said Eb. "You think Jay had anything to do with this?"

"No, I guess I don't." He lowered the lantern and said, "If you fellows would go down to the

river—split up when you get there—some of you go upstream and some of you go down. I don't expect you to find anything, but we might as well look. Be back at daylight and we'll really start combing for him."

The sheriff turned away, walking back up the brick pavement with his lantern swinging.

"I guess," said Eb, "we might as well get started. I'll take one bunch down the river and Joe will take the others up. That all right with the rest of you?"

There was no objection.

They walked out the gate and down the street until they hit the intersection, then went down to the bridge.

"We split up here," said Eb. "Who wants to go with Joe?"

Several men said they would.

"All right," said Eb. "The rest of you come with me."

They separated and plunged down from the street to the river bank. Cold river mist lay close along the bank and in the darkness they could hear the swift, smooth rush of the river. A night bird cried across the water. Looking out to the other bank, one could see the splintered starlight that shattered itself against the running current.

Eb asked, "You think we'll find him, Jay?"

Vickers spoke slowly. "No, I don't. I can't tell you why, but

somewhat I am pretty sure we won't."

XIV

IT was early evening before Vickers returned home. The phone was ringing when he stepped inside the door.

It was Ann Carter. "I've been trying to get you all day. I'm terribly upset. Where have you been?"

"Out looking for a man," said Vickers.

"Please don't be funny, Jay."

"I'm not being funny. An old man, a neighbor of mine, disappeared. I've been out helping look for him."

"Did you find him?"

"No, we didn't."

"That's too bad," she said. "Was he a nice old man?"

"The best."

"Maybe you'll find him later."

"Maybe we will," said Vickers. "Why are you upset?"

"You remember what Crawford said?"

"He said a lot of things."

"But what he told us would come next. You remember that?"

"I can't say that I do."

"He said clothing would be next. A dress for fifty cents."

"Now that you mention it," said Vickers, "he did."

"Well, it happened."

"What happened?"

"A dress. Only it wasn't fifty cents. It was fifteen!"

"You bought one?"

"No, I didn't, Jay. I was too scared. I was walking down Fifth Avenue and there was a sign in the window, a little discreet sign that said the dress on the model could be had for fifteen cents. Can you imagine that, Jay—a dress for fifteen cents on Fifth Avenue!"

"No, I can't," Vickers confessed.

"It was such a pretty dress," said Ann. "It shone. Not with stones or tinsel. The material shone. Like it was alive. And the color . . . Jay, it was the prettiest dress I have ever seen. And I could have bought it for fifteen cents, but I didn't have the nerve. I remembered what Crawford had told us and I stood there looking at the dress and I got cold all over."

"Buck up and go back in the morning. Maybe they'll still have it."

"WHAT isn't the point at all. Don't you see? It proves what Crawford told us! It proves that he knew what he was talking about, that there really is a conspiracy, that the world does have its back against the wall."

"And what do you want me to do about it?"

"Why, I—I don't know, Jay.

I thought you would be interested."

"I am," said Vickers. "Very interested."

"Jay, there's something going on."

"Keep your shirt on, Ann," said Vickers. "Sure, there's something going on."

"What is it? I know it's more than Crawford said. I don't know how—"

"I don't know, either. But it's bigger than you and I can handle. I have to think it out."

"Jay," she said, and the sharp tenseness was gone from her voice. "Jay, I feel better now. It was nice to talk to you."

"You go out in the morning," Jay told her, "and buy up an armful of those fifteen-cent dresses. Get there ahead of the crowd."

"The crowd? I don't understand."

"Look, Ann," said Vickers. "Let us use our head. Fifth Avenue is going to have a crush of bargain hunters."

"I guess you're right at that," she said. "Phone me tomorrow?"

"I'll phone."

They said good night and he hung up, stood for a moment, trying to remember the next thing that he should do. There was supper to get and the papers to bring in and he'd better see if there was any mail.

He went out the door and

walked down the path to the mailbox on the gatepost. He took out a slim handful of letters and leafed through them swiftly, but there was so little light he could not make out what they were. Advertising mostly, he suspected. And a few bills, although it was a bit early in the month for them.

Back in the house he turned on the desk lamp and laid the pile of letters on the desk. Beneath the lamp lay the litter of tubes and disks that he had picked up from the floor the night before. He stood there staring at them, trying to bring them into correct perspective. It had only been the night before, but now it seemed as if it were many weeks ago that he had thrown the paperweight and there had been a crunching sound that had erupted with a shower of tiny parts rolling on the floor.

He had stood there then, as he stood now, and knew there was an answer, a clue, if he only knew where to find it.

A GAIN the phone rang and he went to answer it.

It was Eb, asking, "What do you think of it?"

"I don't know what to think," said Vickers.

"He's in the river," Eb maintained. "That is where he is. That's what I told the sheriff.

They'll start dragging tomorrow morning as soon as the sun is up."

"I don't know," said Vickers. "Maybe you're right, but I don't think he's dead."

"Why don't you think so, Jay?"

"No reason in the world," said Vickers. "No actual, solid reason. Just a hunch."

"The reason I called," Eb told him, "is that I got some of those *Forever* carts. Came in this afternoon. Thought maybe you might want one of them."

"I hadn't thought much about it, Eb. Too many other things on my mind, I suppose."

"I'll bring one up in the morning. Give you a chance to try it out. See what you think of it."

"That'll be fine," said Vickers, and said good-by.

He went back to the desk and picked up the letters. There were no bills. Of the seven letters, six were advertising, the seventh in a plain white envelope addressed in a craggy hand.

He tore it open. There was one sheet of white note paper, neatly folded. He unfolded it and read:

My dear friend Vickers:

I hope that you are not unduly worn out by the strenuous efforts which you undoubtedly will have thrown into the search for me today.

I feel very keenly that my actions will impose upon the kind people of this excellent village a most unseemly amount of running around to the neglect of their business, though I do

not doubt that they will enjoy it most thoroughly.

I feel that I can trust your understanding not to reveal the fact of this letter nor to engage any further than is necessary to convince our neighbors of your kindly intentions in what must necessarily be a futile hunt for me. I can assure you that I am most happy and that only the necessity of the moment made me do what I have done.

I am writing this note for two reasons: First, to quiet any fear you may feel for me. Secondly, to presume upon our friendship to the point of giving some unsolicited advice.

It has seemed to me for some time now that you have been confining yourself too closely to your work and that a holiday might be an excellent idea. It might be that a visit to your childhood scene, to walk again the paths you walked when you were a boy, could clear away the dust and make you see with clearer eyes.

Your friend,

Horton Flanders

XV

I WILL not go, thought Vickers. I cannot go. The place means nothing to me and I do not want it to mean anything now that it is forgotten after all these years of trying to forget it.

He could have shut his eyes and seen it—the yellow clay of the rain-washed cornfields, the roads all white with dust winding through the valleys and along the ridgetops, the lonely mailboxes sitting on forlornly leaning fence posts, the sagging gates, the

weatherbeaten houses, the scraggy cattle coming down the lane, following the rutted path that their hoofs had made, the mangy dogs that ran out and barked at you when you drove past their farms.

If I go back they'll ask me why I came and how I'm getting on. "Too bad about your Pa, he was a damn good man." They'd sit on the upturned boxes in front of the general store and chew slowly on their cuds of tobacco and spit out on the sidewalk and look at him out of slanted eyes and say, "So you write books. By God, some day I'll have to read one of your books; I never heard of them."

He'd go to the cemetery and stand before a stone with his hat held in his hand and listen to the wind moan in the mighty pines, and he'd think, if only I could have amounted to something in time for you to have known, so that the two of you could have been proud of me and bragged about me a little when the neighbors dropped in for a visit—but, of course, I never did.

And he would—finally, he admitted it—drive past the great brick house with the portico and the fanlights above the door. He would drive very slowly and he would look at it and see how the shutters had come loose and were sagging and how the paint was flaking and how the roses that

had bloomed beside the gate had died.

I won't go, he said.

And yet, perhaps, he should.

It might clear away the dust, Flanders had written, might make you see with clearer eyes.

Might make him see what with clearer eyes?

Was there something back there in his boyhood lanes that could explain this situation, some hidden fact, some abstract symbol, which he had missed before?

Or was he imagining things, reading significance into words that had no significance? How could he be sure that Horton Flanders with his shabby suit and ridiculous cane had anything to do with the story that Crawford had spelled out about humanity standing with its back against the wall?

There was no evidence at all.

Yet Flanders had disappeared and had written him a letter.

Clear away the dust, Flanders had written, so that you may see better. And all that he might have meant was that he should clear away the dust so that he could write better.

VICKERS put a hand on the manuscript and ruffled its pages with his thumb, an absent, almost loving gesture. So little done, he thought, so much still ed out the top drawer on the left

he'd done nothing on it. Two full days wasted.

To do the writing that should be done, he must be able to sit down calmly and concentrate, shut out the world and then let the world come in to him, a little at a time, a highly selected world that could be analyzed and set up with a clarity and sharpness that could not be mistaken.

Calmly, he thought. How can a man be calm when he has a thousand questions and a thousand doubts boiling in his mind?

FIRST was the moppet who had come to breakfast and after that the paper he had read. Then he'd gone down to get his car and Eb had told him about the Forever car. Because his car had not been ready, he'd gone to the drugstore corner to catch a bus. Mr. Flanders had come and joined him as he stared at the display in the gadget shop and Mr. Flanders had said—

Wait a second. He had gone to the drugstore corner to get a bus. He had gotten on the bus and sat down in a seat next to the window. He'd looked out the window and no one else had come and sat down with him. He'd ridden to the city in a seat all to himself.

That is it, he thought, and even as he thought it he felt a wild elation and then a sense of

horror at an incident forgotten and he stood for a moment unmoving, trying desperately to blot out what had happened so many years ago. It would not blot out and he knew at once what he must do.

He turned to the desk and pulled to do. Now, for two whole days, side and slowly, methodically, took out the contents, one by one. He did this with all the drawers and did not find what he was looking for.

The attic, perhaps. One of the boxes up there.

He climbed the stairs and, reaching the top, blinked at the glow of the unshielded light bulb hanging from the ceiling. There was a chill in the air and in the starkness of the rafters, coming down on either side of him, like a mighty jaw about to close.

Vickers went from the stairs to the storage boxes pushed against the eaves. In which one of the three would it be most likely to be found? He had no idea whatever.

So he started with the first and he found it halfway down, under the old pair of bird shooters that he had hunted for last fall and had finally given up for lost.

He opened the notebook and thumbed through it until he came finally to the pages that he was seeking.

IT must have been going on for years before he noticed it. The record said that it was worse than he had first imagined, that it concerned not only one phase of his existence, but many different phases. As the evidence accumulated, he stood aghast that he had not realized it before, because it was something which should have been obvious from the very first.

The whole thing started with the reluctance of his fellow passengers to ride with him on the bus. He lived at the time in an old ramshackle boarding house at the edge of town near the end of the line. He'd get on in the morning and, being one of the few who boarded at that point, would take his favorite seat.

The bus would fill up gradually as the stops were made, but it would be almost the end of the run before he'd have a seat companion. It didn't bother him, of course; in fact, he rather liked it that way, for then he could slump down in the seat and think and probably even doze a little without ever considering the need of civility. Not that he would have been especially civil in any case, he now admitted. The hour that he went to work was altogether too early for that.

People would get on the bus

and they'd sit with other people, not necessarily people whom they knew, for sometimes, Vickers noticed, they didn't exchange a single word for the entire ride with their seat mate. They'd sit with other people, but they'd never sit with him until all the other seats were filled and they had to sit with him or stand.

Perhaps, he had told himself, it was body odor; perhaps it was bad breath. He had made a ritual of bathing after that, using a new soap that was guaranteed to make him smell fresh. He brushed his teeth more attentively, used mouth wash until he gagged at the sight of it.

It did no good. He still rode alone.

He looked at himself in the mirror and he knew it was not his clothes, for in those days he was a smart dresser.

So, he figured, it must be his attitude. Instead of slumping down in the seat, he'd sit up and be bright and cheerful and he'd smile at everyone. He'd smile if it cracked his face to do it.

For an entire week he had sat there looking pleasant, smiling at people when they glanced at him, for all the world as if he were a rising young business man who had read Dale Carnegie and belonged to the Junior Chamber.

No one rode with him—not until there was no other seat. He

got some comfort in knowing they'd rather sit with him than stand..

THEN he had noticed other things. At the office, the fellows were always visiting around, gathering in little groups of three or four at one of the desks, talking about their golf scores or telling the latest dirty story or wondering why the hell a guy stayed on at a place like this when there were other jobs he could just walk out and take.

No one ever came to his desk, so he tried joining one of the groups. Within a short time, the fellows would all drift back to their desks. He tried dropping by to pass the time of the day with individual workers. They were always affable enough, but always terribly busy. Vickers never stayed.

He checked up on his conversational budget. It seemed fairly satisfactory. He didn't play golf, but he knew a few good stories and he read most of the latest books and saw the best of the recent movies. He could damn the office with the best of them, even though he liked working there. He read the newspapers and went through a couple of news weeklies and knew what was going on and could argue politics and had armchair opinions on military matters. With those

qualifications, he felt, he should be able to carry on a fair conversation. But still no one seemed to want to talk to him.

It was the same at lunch. It was the same, now that he had come to notice it, everywhere he went.

He had written it down for a full six months, with dates and an account of each day, and now, fifteen years later, he sat on a box in a raw and empty attic and read the words he'd written. Staring straight ahead of him, he remembered how it had been, how he'd felt and what he'd said and done including the fact that no one would ride with him until all the seats were taken. And that was what had happened when he'd gone to New York just the other day.

Why?

He'd asked himself the question all those years ago and now, at last, he thought he knew the answer.

It was because he was different in some way, in some subtle way you couldn't put a finger on, but one that you could sense.

A group of dogs would not tolerate a strange dog. They would smell him over and insult him and gang up on him and drive him away.

Strange dog, he thought, that is what I am. A strange dog among the normal, barnyard dogs

of the human race. And these normal dogs do not accept me. They smell me over and walk stiff-legged and keep a wary eye upon me and at times, perhaps, they may even fear or hate me.

My God, what am I?

XVII

SOMEONE was hammering on the door downstairs and shouting, but it was a moment or two before he realized it was his name that was being called.

He rose from the box and the notebook fell from his fingers and fell rumpled on the floor, face downward, with its open pages caught and crumpled.

"Jay!" the voice shouted. "Jay, are you here?"

He stumbled down the stairs and into the living room. Eb stood just inside the door.

"What's the matter, Eb?"

"Listen, Jay," Eb told him, "you got to get out of here."

"What for?"

"They think you did away with Flanders."

Vickers reached out a hand and caught the back of a chair and hung onto it.

"I won't even ask you if you did," said Eb. "I'm pretty sure you didn't. That's why I'm giving you a chance."

"A chance?" asked Vickers. "What are you talking about?"

"They're down at the tavern now, talking themselves into a lynching party."

"They?"

"All your friends," Eb said, bitterly. "Someone got them all stirred up. I don't know who it was. I didn't wait to find out who. I came straight up here."

"But I liked Flanders. I was the only friend he had."

"You haven't any time," Eb said. "You've got to get away."

"I can't go anywhere. I haven't got my car."

"I brought up one of the *Forever cars*," said Eb. "No one knows I brought it. No one will know you have it."

"I can't run away. They've got to listen to me."

"You damn fool, this isn't the sheriff with a warrant. It's a mob and they won't listen to you." He strode across the room and grabbed Vickers roughly by the arm. "I risked my neck to come up here and warn you. After I've done that, you can't throw the chance away."

Vickers shook the hand off. "All right, I'll go."

"Money?" asked Eb.

"I have some."

"Here's some more." Eb reached into his pocket and held out a thin sheaf of bills.

Vickers took it and stuck it in his pocket.

"The car is full of gas," said

Eb. "The shift is automatic. It drives like any other car. I left the motor running."

"I hate to do this, Eb."

"I know just how you hate to, but if you want to save this town a killing, there's nothing else to do. Come on, get going."

VIICKERS trotted down the path and heard Eb pounding along behind him. The car stood at the gate. Eb had left the door wide open.

"In you go," said Eb. "Cut straight over to the main highway."

"Thanks, Eb."

"Get out of here."

Vickers pulled the shift to the drive position and stepped on the gas. The car floated away and swiftly gathered speed. He reached the main highway and swung in toward the west.

He drove for miles, fleeing down the cone of brightness thrown by the headlights. He drove with a numb bewilderment that he should be doing this—that he, Jay Vickers, should be fleeing from a lynching party made up of his home town friends.

They were not his friends, he reminded himself. They were the barnyard dogs and he was the strange dog—that had wandered in. He thought of them one by one, and as he thought of them

their lips pulled back to reveal their fangs and there a savage growl rumbling in their throats.

Someone, Eb had said, had got them all stirred up. Someone, perhaps, who hated him? But there was no one who hated him. No one he could think of.

But even as he thought it, he knew who it was. He felt again the threat and the fear that he had felt when he had sat face to face with Crawford—the then-unrealized reaction that had made him refuse the offer to write Crawford's book.

There's something going on, Horton Flanders had said, standing with him in front of the gadget shop.

And there was something going on.

There were everlasting gadgets being made by nonexistent firms. There was an organization of world businessmen, backed into a corner by a foe at whom they could not strike back. There was Horton Flanders talking of some new, strange factors which kept the world from war. There were Pretensionists, hiding from the actuality of today, playing doll-house with the past.

And, finally, here was Jay Vickers fleeing to the west.

By midnight, he knew where he was going—where Horton Flanders had said that he should go, doing what he had said he

would certainly never do.

He was going back to his own childhood.

XVIII

EXACTLY the way he had expected, they sat out in front of the general store, on the bench and the upturned boxes, and turned sly eyes up toward him and they said: "Too bad about your Pa, Jay. He was a damn good man."

They said: "So you write books, do you? Have to read one of your books someday. Never heard of them."

They said: "You going out to the old place?"

"This afternoon," said Vickers.

"It's changed a whole lot. There ain't no one living there."

"No one?"

"Farming's gone to hell. Can't make no money at it. This carbohydrates business. Lots of folks can't keep their places. Farms around here being bought up for grazing—just fix the fences and turn some cattle in. Don't even try to farm. Buy feeder stuff out in the west and turn it loose the summer, then fatten it for fall."

"That's what happened to the old place?"

"That's what happened. Feller that bought it after your Pa, he couldn't make the rifle. Your

Pa's place ain't the only one. There's been lots of others, too. You remember the old Preston place, don't you?"

Vickers nodded.

"Well, it happened there, too. And that was a good place. One of the best there was."

"No one living there?"

"No one. Somebody boarded up the doors and windows. Now why do you figure anyone would go to all the work of boarding up the place?"

"I wouldn't know," said Vickers.

The storekeeper came out and sat down on the steps.

"Where you hanging out now, Jay?" he asked.

"In the East."

"Doing right well, I expect."

"I'm eating every day."

"Well," the storekeeper said, "anyone that can eat regular is doing downright well."

"What kind of car is that you got?" another of them asked.

"It's a new kind of car," said Vickers. "Just got it the other day. Called the Forever car."

They said: "Now ain't that a hell of a name to call a car?"

They said: "I imagine it cost you a pile."

They said: "How many miles to a gallon do you get on it?"

"I havn't to go now," Vickers replied, a little frantically. "See you on my way back."

He climbed into the car and sped away through the dowdy little village, anxious to go where there would be answers instead of questions, for he saw now that his own questions were even more urgent than he had suspected.

XIX

THE gate to the farm was chained and locked, so he parked the car beside the highway and walked the quarter mile down to the buildings.

The farm road was overgrown with grass in places and knee-high with weeds in others and only here and there could you find the sign of wheel-ruts. Some windows in the house were broken, probably by kids, and the door to the back porch had become unlocked and was swinging in the wind.

He waded through the sea of grass, walking around the house, astonished at how tenaciously the marks of living still clung about the place. There, on the chimney, running up the outside wall, were the prints of his ten-year old hands, impressed into wet mortar. At the corner of the house he found the old washtub where his mother each spring had planted the nasturtians, but the tub itself was almost gone, its metal turned to rust and all that remained was a mound of earth.

He did not try the door, for the outside was all he wished to see. There would be too much to see inside—the nail holes on the wall where the pictures had been hung and the marks on the floor where the stove had stood and the stairway with the treads worn smooth by beloved foot-steps. If he went in, the house would cry out to him from the silences of its closets and the emptiness of its rooms.

He walked down to the other buildings and they, for all their own silence and emptiness, were not so memory-haunted as the house. The henhouse was falling in and the hoghouse was a place for the winter winds to whistle through and he found an old, worn-out binder stored in the back of the cavernous machine shed.

The barn was cool and shadowed. The stalls were empty, but the hay still hung in cobwebby wisps from the cracks in the floor of the mow and the place still had the half-misty, half-acid smell of living, friendly beasts.

He climbed the incline to the granary and, sliding back the wooden latch, went in. Mice ran squeaking across the floor and up the walls and beams. A pile of grain sacks was draped across the partition that held the grain back from the alley way and a broken harness hung from a peg

upon the wall and there, at the end of alley, lay something that stopped him.

IT was a child's top, battered now and with all its color gone, but once it had been bright and colorful and when it was pumped on the floor, it had spun and whistled. He had received it for Christmas and it had been a favorite toy of his.

He picked it up and held its battered metal with a sudden tenderness and wondered how it had gotten there. It was a part of his past catching up with him—a dead and useless thing to everyone in all the world except the boy to whom it had once belonged.

It had been a striped top and the colors had run in spiraling streaks when you spun it and there had been a point, he remembered, where each streak ran and disappeared. You could sit for hours watching the streaks come up and disappear, trying to make out where they went. For they must go somewhere, a boyish mind would figure. They couldn't be there one second and be gone the next. There must be somewhere for them to go.

And there had been somewhere for them to go!

You could go where the streaks went, into the land they fled to, if you were very young and could

wonder hard enough.

It was a sort of fairyland, although it seemed more real than a fairyland should be. There was a walk that looked as if it were made of glass and there were birds and flowers and trees and some butterflies and he picked one of the flowers and carried it in his hand as he walked along the path. He had seen a little house hidden in a grove and when he saw it, he became a little frightened and walked back along the path and suddenly he was home, with the top dead on the floor in front of him and the flower clutched in his hand.

He had told his mother and she had snatched away the flower, as if she'd been afraid of it. And well she might have been, for it was winter.

That evening Pa had questioned him and found out about the top and the next day, when he'd looked for the top, he couldn't find it anywhere. He had cried off and on for days, secretly of course.

And here it was again, an old and battered top, with no hint of the original color, but the same one, he was sure.

He left the granary, carrying the battered top along with him. Through all the years, he had not remembered it, had not even suspected that there was an incident such as this hidden in his mind.

But now the top was with him once again and the day was with him, too—the day he'd followed the swirling streaks and walked into fairyland.

XX

HE told himself he would not stop at the Preston house. He would drive by and have a look at it, but he would not stop. For he was fleeing now. He had found an artifact of childhood that now brought only pain and frustration.

He wouldn't stop at the Preston house. He'd just slow down and look, then speed up the car and put the miles behind him.

He wouldn't stop, he said.

But, of course, he did.

He sat in the car and gazed at the house and remembered that it once had been proud and had sheltered a family that had been proud as well—too proud to let a member of its family marry a country lad from a farm of sickly corn and yellow clay.

But the house was proud no longer. The shutters were closed and someone had nailed long planks across them. The paint was scaling and peeling from the stately columns that ran across its front.

He got out of the car and walked through the drooping front gate up to the porch. Climbing

the stairs, he saw how the floor boards had rotted.

He stood where the two of them first had known their love would last forever and he tried to catch that moment of the past and it was not there. He tried to remember how the meadows and the fields and yard had looked from the porch, with the white moonlight upon them. He knew, but he could not feel or see them.

On the slope behind the house were the barns. Beyond them, the ground sloped down and there stretched out before him the valley they had walked that last time he had seen her.

It had been an enchanted valley, he remembered, with apple blossoms and the song of lark.

It had been enchanted once. It had not been the second time. But what about the third?

He told himself that he was chasing rainbow ends, but while he told himself, he was walking down the slope, down past the barns and on into the valley.

At the head of it, he stopped and looked and it was not enchanted, but he remembered it, as he had remembered the moonlight on the columns. He saw the crab apple thickets, with the blossoms fallen now, and once a lark soared out of the grass and flew into the sky.

But the third visit here had

been the same as the second. It had been she who had turned this prosaic valley into an enchanted place. It had been, after all, an enchantment of the spirit.

Twice he had walked in enchanted places.

Twice. Once because of a girl and the love between them. Once again because of a spinning top.

No, the top had been the first.

Yes, the top—

Now wait a minute! Not so fast!

You're wrong, Vickers. It wouldn't be that way.

You crazy fool, what are you running for?

XXI

THE manager of the dime store, when Vickers sought him out, seemed to understand.

"You know," he said, "I understand just how you feel. I had a top like that myself when I was a kid. There's nothing like a top to play with."

"Especially those big ones," said Vickers. "The ones with the handle on them and you pumped them on the floor and they whistled."

"Sat and played with it for hours when I was a kid."

"Watching where the stripes went?"

"I don't recall I worried much about where the stripes might go.

I just sat and watched it spin and listened to it whistle."

"I used to worry about where they went. You know how it is. They travel up and then they disappear, somewhere near the top."

"Tell me," said the manager, "where do they go?"

"I don't know," Vickers admitted.

"There's another dime store down the street a block or two. Carries a lot of junky stuff, but they might have a top like that left over."

"Thanks," said Vickers.

"You could also try the hardware store across the street. They carry quite a stock of toys, but I suppose they got them put away down in the basement. They only get them out at Christmas time."

The man at the hardware store knew what Vickers wanted, but he didn't have one. The other dime store didn't either. No, said the girl, chewing gum and thrusting a pencil back and forth into the wad of hair above her ear, she didn't know where he might get one. There were a lot of other things here if he wanted to get something for a little boy. Like those toy rockets or these—

He went out on the sidewalk, watching the late afternoon crowd of shoppers in the little Midwestern town. There were women in print dresses and other women

in sleek business suits and there were high school kids just out of class and businessmen out for a cup of coffee. He saw a crowd of loafers gathered around his *Forever* car, parked in front of the first dime store. It was time, he thought, to feed that parking meter.

He reached into his pocket. The coins made him wonder about the money in his billfold, so he took it out and flipped it open and saw that all he had left were two dollar bills.

Since he couldn't go back to Cliffwood, he had no place to call his home. He'd need money for lodging for the night and for meals and for gasoline—but more than that, more than anything, he was in need of a singing top that had colored stripes painted on its belly.

VICKERS stood in the middle of the sidewalk, thinking about the top. It had worked once before, when he was a child, before Pa had taken the top away from him.

What would have happened to him if it had not been hidden away? He wondered if he would have gone again and again, once he had found the way, back into that fairyland and what might have happened there, whom and what he might have met and what he would have found in the house

hidden in the grove. For he eventually would have gone to the house. Having watched it long enough to grow accustomed to it, he would have followed the path across the grove and gone up to the door and knocked.

He wondered if anyone else had ever watched a spinning top and walked into fairyland. And he wondered, if they had, what had happened to them.

The dime store manager had not done it. He had never wondered where the stripes might go. He had just sat and watched and listened to the whistle.

Vickers wondered what he was, that he should have found the way. And he wondered if the enchanted valley might not have been a part of fairyland as well and if somehow the girl and he might not have walked through another unseen gate. For surely the valley that he remembered was not the valley he had walked that morning.

A top, he thought. Somewhere, someplace, somehow, I must find a top.

But, of course, he had a top. The handle of it would have to be straightened and it might need a bit of oil to clear away the rust and it would have to be painted.

More than likely it would be better than any other he could get, for it would be the original

top—and it pleased him to think that it might have certain special qualities, a certain mystic function no other top might have.

He was glad that he had thought of it, lying there, forgotten for the second time, in the glove compartment where he had tossed it after finding it again.

He walked up the street to the hardware store.

"I want some paint," said Vickers. "The brightest, glossiest paint you have. Red and green and yellow. And some little brushes to put it on with."

XXII

HE called Ann from his hotel room, collect, since, after eating dinner, he had only ninety cents.

She sounded harried. "Where in the name of heaven did you go?"

He told her where he was.

"But why are you there?" she asked him. "What is the matter with you?"

"There's nothing wrong with me," said Vickers. "That is, nothing yet. I am just a fugitive."

"You are what?"

"I got run out of Cliffwood. They were fixing up a necktie party. Somehow, or other they got it into their heads that I had killed a man."

"Now I know you're crazy. You wouldn't kill a fly."

"But I couldn't explain that to them. I didn't have a chance."

"Why," said Ann, "I talked to Eb . . ."

"You talked to who?"

"You know, the man in the garage. For two whole days I beat the bushes for you. I called your home and there was no one there, so I remembered you talking about Eb, the garageman, and I asked the operator to let me talk to him."

"What did Eb say?"

"He said he hadn't noticed you around, but he didn't know where you were. He told me not to worry."

"Eb was the one who tipped me off," said Vickers. "He gave me a car and some money and saw me out of town."

"Of all the silly things. Who was it they thought you killed?"

"Horton Flanders. He's the old man that got lost."

"But you wouldn't kill him. You said he was a nice old man. You told me so yourself."

"Look, Ann," said Vickers, "I didn't kill anyone. Someone just got the boys stirred up."

"But you can't go back to Cliffwood."

"No, I can't."

"What will you do, Jay?"

"I don't know. Just stay hid out, I guess."

"WHY didn't you call me right away?" demanded Ann. "What are you way out West for? You should have come straight to New York. New York is the swellest place there is for someone to hide out. You might at least have called me."

"Now wait a minute," Vickers said. "I called you, didn't I?"

"Sure. You called me because you're broke and want me to wire some money and you—"

"I haven't asked for any money yet."

"You will."

"Yes," he said, "I'm afraid I will."

"Aren't you interested in why I was trying to get hold of you?"

"Mildly," said Vickers. "Because you don't want me to get out from under your thumb. No agent wants their best author to get from under—"

"Some day I'm going to crucify you and hang you up along the roadside as a warning."

"I would make a most pathetic Christ. You couldn't choose a better man. All right, why did you want me?"

"Because Crawford's practically frantic. He won't quibble. I mentioned a fantastic figure and he didn't even shiver."

"I thought we disposed of Mr. Crawford," Vickers said.

"You don't dispose of Crawford." Her voice was quiet but

strained. "Crawford is a badly frightened man. He came to me. Imagine that! He came into my office, puffing and panting, and I was afraid I didn't have a chair in the place strong enough. But you remember that old oak one over in the corner? It was one of the first sticks of furniture I ever bought for my office and I kept it as a sentimental piece. Well, it did the trick."

"What trick?"

"It held him," said Ann, triumphantly. "He'd have simply crushed anything else in the place. You remember what a big man he is."

"Gross," said Vickers. "That's the word you want."

"He said, 'Where's Vickers?' And I said, 'Why ask me? I don't keep a leash on Vickers.' And he says, 'You're his agent, aren't you?' And I said, 'Yes, the last time I heard, but Vickers is a very changeable sort of man. There's no telling about him.' He says he's got to have Vickers. And so I said, 'Well, go get him. You'll find him around somewhere.' He said, 'The sky's the limit. Name any price, make any terms you want!'"

"The man's a crackpot," Vickers said.

"There's nothing crackpot about the kind of money he's offering."

"How do you know he's got the money?"

"Well, I don't know. Not for sure, that is. But he must have."

"Speaking of money," Vickers said, "have you got a loose hundred lying around? Or fifty, even?"

"I can get it."

"Wire it here. I'll pay you back."

"All right," she said. "It isn't the first time I've bailed you out and I don't imagine it will be the last. But will you tell me one thing?"

"What's that?"

"What are you going to do?"

"As soon as I get through talking to you," said Vickers, "I'm going to do some painting."

"A house?"

"No, a top."

"The top of what?"

"Not the top of anything. A top. A toy kids play with. You spin it on the floor."

"Now listen to me," she said. "You cut out this playing around and come home to Ann."

"After the experiment," said Vickers.

"Tell me about it, Jay."

"I'm going to try to get into fairyland."

"Quit talking foolish."

"I did it once before. No, twice."

"Listen, Jay. This business is serious. Crawford is scared and so am I. And there's this lynching threat, too. There's no time

for kidding or playing games."

"Send me the money," Vickers said.

"Right away."

"I'll see you in a day or two."

"Call me tomorrow. Take care of yourself. I don't know what you're up to, but take care of yourself."

"I'll do both," Vickers promised. "Take care of myself and call you tomorrow."

"I'll kill you if you don't."

"Ann," he said unhappily, "you could choose your colloquialisms a little more tactfully."

XXIII

HE straightened the handle which spun the top and he polished the metal before marking off the spirals with a pencil and he borrowed a can of sewing machine oil and oiled up the spinning spiral on the handle so that it worked smoothly. Then he went about the painting.

He got paint on his hands and on his clothes and on the chair he laid the top on and he spilled the can of red paint on the floor, but he picked it up so quickly that scarcely any of it ran out onto the carpeting.

Finally the job was finished and it looked fairly good.

He worried whether it would be dry by morning, but he read the labels on the cans and the la-

bels said the paint was quick drying, so he was somewhat relieved.

He was ready now, ready to see what he would find when he spun the top. It might be fairyland and it might be nothing. Most likely it would be nothing, for more would go into it than the spinning of the top—The mind and the faith and the pure simplicity of a child. And he didn't have that any longer.

He went out and closed and locked the door behind him, then went down the stairs. The town and the hotel were too small to have elevators. Although not so small a town as the little village that had been "town" to him in his childhood days, that little village where they still sat out on the bench in front of the store and looked up at you with side-wise glances and asked you impudent, prying questions out of which to weave the fabric of long gossiping.

He chuckled, thinking of what they'd say when the word got back of how he had fled from Cliffwood on the threat of being lynched.

"He always was a sly one and not up to any good," they would say. "His Ma and Pa were real good people, though. Beats hell how a son sometimes turns out no matter if his Ma and Pa were honest people."

He went through the lobby and

out the door and stood out on the street.

Maybe, he thought, he should have told Ann that it had been Crawford who had stirred up the boys in Cliffwood. Not Crawford himself, perhaps, but some of Crawford's henchmen.

But maybe it was just as well that he hadn't told Ann. There was no use worrying her, and if he'd told her, she'd have wanted to know how he knew it had been Crawford and why had Crawford done it. And, of course, he couldn't tell her that.

AT a diner, Vickers ordered a cup of coffee and the waitress said to him, "Nice night, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," he said.

"You want anything to go with that coffee, mister?"

"No," said Vickers. "Just the coffee."

She moved on up the counter and wiped off imaginary spots with a cloth she carried in her hand.

A top, he thought. Where did it tie in? He'd take the top to the house and spin it and would know once and for all if there were a fairyland—well, no, the flower in winter had been proof of that. He'd know if he could get back into fairyland.

And the house. Where did the house tie in?

Or did either the house or the top tie in?

And if they didn't tie in, why had Horton Flanders written: "Go back and travel the paths you walked in childhood. Maybe there you will find a thing you'll need—or something that is missing." He wished he could remember the exact words Flanders had used, but he could not.

So he had come back and he had found a top and, more than that, he had remembered fairy-land. And why, he asked himself, in all the years since he had been eight, had he never recalled that enchanted visit?

It had made a deep impression on him at the time, of that there was no doubt, for once he remembered it, it had been as clear and sharp as if it had just happened.

But something had made him forget it, some mental block, perhaps. And something had made him know that the metal mouse had wanted to be trapped. And something had made him instinctively refuse Crawford's proposition.

Strange dog, he said. You're a strange dog, Vickers.

The waitress came back down the counter and leaned on her elbow.

"You like pictures, mister?" asked the girl.

"I don't know," said Vickers. "I seldom go to them."

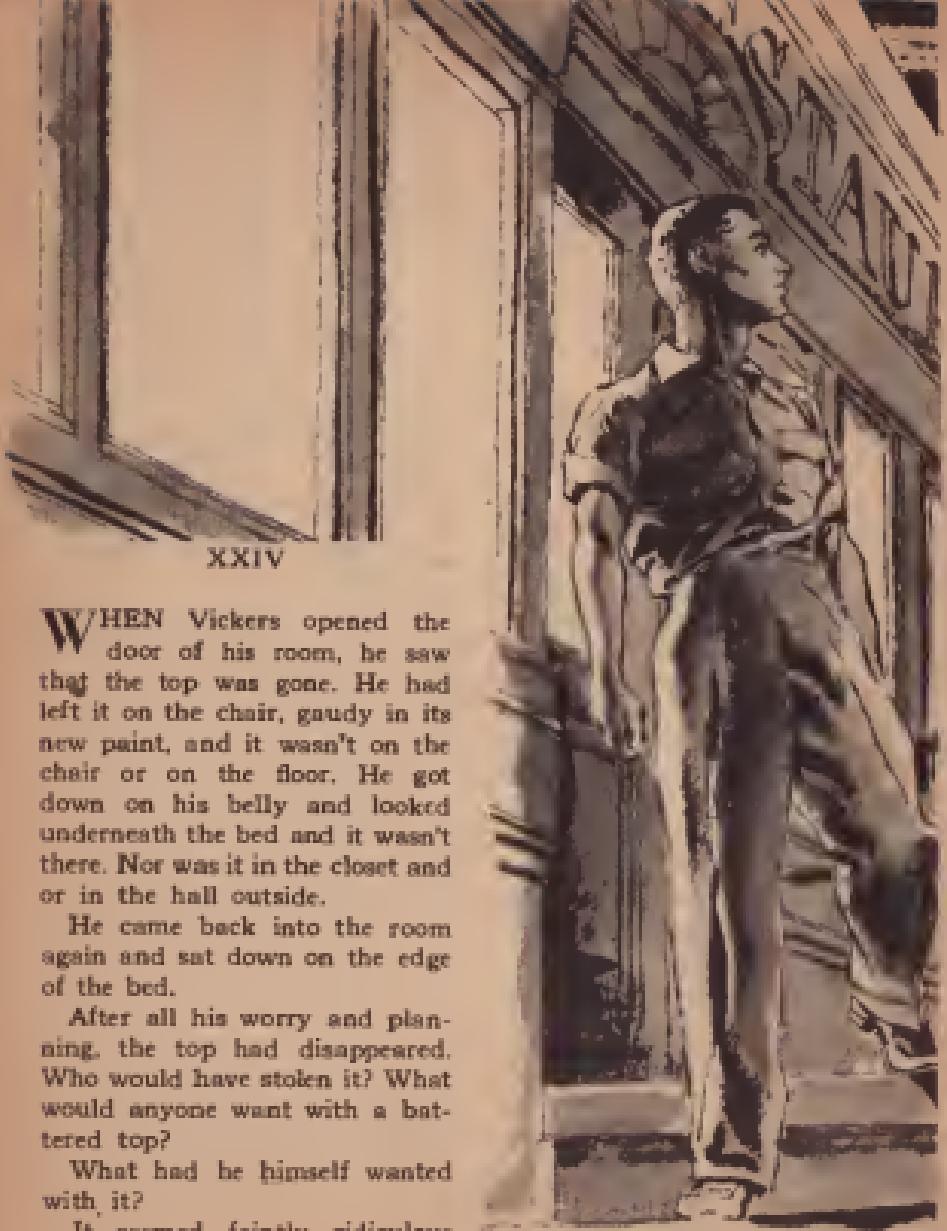
Her face said she sympathized with anyone who didn't. "I just live for them," she said.

He looked up at her and saw she wore the face of Everyone. It was the face of the two women who talked in the seat behind him on the bus; it was the face of Mrs. Leslie, saying to him, "Some of us are going to organize a Pretensionist club . . ." And, yes, it was the face of Mrs. Leslie's husband, crowding drink and women into a barren life. It was the face of grinding anxiety that had become commonplace, that seat people fleeing for psychological shelters against the bombs of uncertainty.

Cynicism had run out and flippancy had never been more than a temporary shield. So now the people fled to the drug of pretense, identifying themselves with another life and another time and place—at the movie theater or on the television screen or in the Pretensionist movement. For so long as you were someone else, you need not be yourself, vulnerable and afraid.

He finished his coffee and went out.

Overhead, a jet plane flashed past, streaking low, the snarl of its tubes bouncing back against the walls. He watched its lights draw twin lines of fire over the night horizon, and then went for a walk.

A detailed black and white illustration of a woman with dark hair, wearing a light-colored coat and a dark hat. She is looking out of a window with a striped curtain. The window frame is visible on the left. The background shows a building with large letters that partially read "STEADY".

XXIV

WHEN Vickers opened the door of his room, he saw that the top was gone. He had left it on the chair, gaudy in its new paint, and it wasn't on the chair or on the floor. He got down on his belly and looked underneath the bed and it wasn't there. Nor was it in the closet and or in the hall outside.

He came back into the room again and sat down on the edge of the bed.

After all his worry and planning, the top had disappeared. Who would have stolen it? What would anyone want with a battered top?

What had he himself wanted with it?

It seemed faintly ridiculous



now, sitting on the edge of the bed in a strange hotel room, to ask himself these questions.

He had thought the top would buy his way into fairyland and now, in the white glare of the ceiling light, he wondered at himself for the madness of his antics.

Behind him, the door came open and he heard it and turned around sharply.

In the door stood Crawford, even more massive than Vickers had remembered him. He filled the doorway and he stood motionless, without a single flicker except for the eyelids.

Crawford said, "Good evening, Mr. Vickers. Won't you ask me to come in?"

"Certainly," said Vickers. "I was waiting for a call from you. I never thought you would take

the trouble to travel here in person."

And that was a lie, of course, because he'd not been waiting for a call.

Crawford moved ponderously across the room. "This chair looks strong enough to hold me. You don't mind, I hope."

"It's not my chair. Go ahead and bust it."

It creaked and groaned, but it held.

Crawford relaxed and sighed. "I always feel so much better when I get a good strong chair beneath me."

"You tapped Ann's phone," said Vickers.

"Why, certainly. How else would I have found you? I knew that, sooner or later, you would call her."

"I saw the plane come in. If I had known it was you, I'd have driven out to meet you."

Crawford chuckled. "I'll bet."

"Damned right I would. I have a bone to pick with you."

"I don't doubt it," Crawford said. "Which in particular?"

"Why did you almost get me lynched?"

"I wouldn't have you lynched," said Crawford. "I'm too much in need of you."

"What for?"

"I don't know. I thought maybe you would know."

"Crawford, what is this all about? You didn't tell me the truth that day I came in to see you."

"I told you the truth, or at least part of it. I couldn't tell you everything we knew."

"Why not?"

"I didn't know who you were."

"But you seem to know now."

"YES, I do," said Crawford.

"You are one of them."

"One of whom?"

"One of the gadgeteers."

"What in hell makes you think so?"

"Analyzers. That's what the psych boys call them. We had analyzers in your house. The damn things are uncanny. I don't pretend to understand them."

"And the analyzers said I was a strange dog."

"Translate, please," said Crawford, puzzled.

"You know how a strange dog is. The other dogs all come out to meet it and they sniff it over and circle around and growl a bit and take an experimental nip or two. And all the time the strange dog stands there, stiff and still, not moving at all, waiting for the other dogs to pass inspection on it."

"I see. Yes, I guess we sniffed you some."

"I warn you, Crawford. I won't stand still. I won't let you take any nips."

"I'm not nipping at you."

"Not yet," said Vickers. "If I am one of them, you are fighting me. A world with its back against the wall. Remember."

"Don't say 'if.' You are one of them, but quit acting as if I were an enemy."

"If I am what you say I am, you are an enemy."

"You don't understand," said Crawford. "Let's try analogy. Let's go back to the day when the Cro-Magnon drifted into Neanderthal territory . . ."

"Don't give me analogy," Vickers told him. "Tell me what is on your mind."

"I just plain don't like the situation."

"You forget that I don't know what the situation is."

"That's what I was trying to

tell you with my analogy. You are the Cro-Magnon. You have the bow and arrow and the spear. I am the Neanderthal. I only have a club. You have clothing fashioned out of hides and furs and I have nothing but the hair I stand in."

"I wouldn't know," said Vickers.

"I'm not so sure myself," Crawford admitted. "I'm not up on that sort of stuff. Maybe I gave the Cro-Magnon a bit too much and the Neanderthal a bit too little. But that's not the point at all."

"I get the point. Where do we go from there?"

"THE Neanderthal fought back," said Crawford, "and what happened to him?"

"He became extinct."

"They may have died for many reasons besides the spear and arrow. Perhaps they were squeezed out of their hunting grounds. Perhaps they died of shame—the knowledge that they were outdated, that they were, by comparison, little more than beasts."

"I doubt," said Vickers, "that a Neanderthal could work up a very powerful inferiority complex."

"The suggestion may not apply to the Neanderthal. It does apply to us."

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"You're trying to make me see how deep the cleavage goes."

"That is what I'm doing," Crawford told him. "You can't realize the depth of hate, the margin of intelligence and ability. Nor can you realize how desperate we really are.

"Who are these desperate men? I'll tell you. They're the successful ones, the industrialists, the bankers, the businessmen, the professional men, those who have security and hold positions of importance, who move in social circles which mark the high tide of our culture.

"They'd no longer hold their positions if your kind of men took over. They'd be Neanderthal to your Cro-Magnon. They'd survive physically, but they'd be aborigines. Their values would be swept away and those values, built up painfully, are all they have to live by."

Vickers shook his head. "I suppose I should pretend I know as much as you think I do—act smart and make you believe I know all there is to know. Fence with you. Get you to tip your hand. I'd rather be honest and say it's all Greek to me."

"I know it is. That's why I wanted to reach you as soon as possible. You haven't yet shed the chrysalis of an ordinary man. The tendency is to shift toward mutation—more today than yes-

terday, more tomorrow than today. But tonight, in this room, you and I still can talk man to man."

"We could always talk."

"No, we couldn't," Crawford dissented. "If you were entirely mutant, I'd feel the difference in us. Without equality I'd doubt the soundness of my logic. As it is, you're doubting yours, which gives me an advantage. I won't have that advantage when you finish mutating."

"Just before you came in," said Vickers, "I'd almost convinced myself it was all imagination . . ."

"It's not imagination, Vickers. You had a top, remember?"

"The top is gone."

"Not gone," said Crawford.

"You have it?"

"No, I haven't. I don't know where it is, but it still is somewhere in this room. You see, I got here before you did and I picked the lock. Incidentally, a very inefficient lock."

"Incidentally," said Vickers, "a very sneaky trick."

"Granted. And before this is over, I'll commit other sneaky tricks. But to go back. I picked the lock and walked into the room and I saw the top and wondered and I—well, I—"

"Go on."

"Look, Vickers, I had a top like that when I was a kid. Long, long ago. So I picked it up and

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spun it. For no reason. Well, yes,
there may have been a reason.
Maybe an attempt to regain a
lost moment of my childhood.
And the top . . . ”

He stopped speaking and stared
hard at Vickers, as if he might
be trying to detect some sign of
laughter. When he spoke again,
his voice was almost casual.

“The top disappeared.”

VICKERS said nothing.

“What was it?” Crawford
asked. “What kind of top was
that?”

“I don’t know. Were you
watching it when it disappeared?”

“No. I thought I heard some-
one in the hall. I took a fast

glance. It was gone when I looked
back.”

“It shouldn’t have dis-
appeared,” said Vickers. “Not with-
out you watching it.”

“There was some reason for
the top. You had painted it. You
wouldn’t go to all that trouble
without some purpose. What was
the top for, Vickers?”

“To go into fairyland.”

“You’re talking riddles,” snapped
Crawford irritably.

“I went—physically—when I
was a kid.”

“Ten days ago, I would have
said both of us were crazy, you
for saying it and I for believing
it. I can’t say it now.”

“We still may be crazy, or, at

best, just a pair of fools."

"We're neither fools nor crazy," Crawford said. "We are men, the two of us, not quite the same and more different by the hour, but we still are men and not crazy or fools."

"Why did you come here, Crawford? Don't tell me just to talk. You're too anxious. You had a tap on Ann's phone to find out where I'd gone. You sneaked into my room and you spun the top. All right, why?"

"I came here to warn you that the men I represent are desperate, that they will stop at nothing. They won't be taken over."

"And if they have no choice?"

"They have a choice. They can fight with what they have."

"The Neanderthalers fought with clubs."

"So will *Homo sapiens*. Clubs against your arrows. That's why I want to talk to you. There must be some area for agreement."

"Ten days ago," said Vickers, "I sat in your office and talked with you. You described the situation and you said you were mystified and stumped. To hear you tell it then, you didn't have the ghost of an idea what was going on. Why did you lie to me?"

CRAWFORD sat stolidly, unmoving, no change of expression on his face. "We had the

machine on you, remember? The analyzers. We wanted to find out how much you knew."

"How much did I know?"

"Not a thing. All we found out was that you were a latent mutant."

"Then why pick me out?" demanded Vickers. "Except for what you tell me, I have no reason to believe that I am a mutant. I know no mutants. I can't speak for mutants. If you want to make a deal, go catch yourself a real, honest-to-God mutant."

"We picked you out," said Crawford, "for a simple reason. You are the only mutant we could lay a finger on. You and one other—and the other is even less aware than you."

"But you think there are more."

"We know there are. But we can't catch them. You can pin them down only when they want to see you. Otherwise they are always out."

"Out?"

"They disappear," explained Crawford harshly. "We track them down and wait. We send in word and wait. We ring doorbells and wait. We never find them in. They go in a door, but they aren't in the room. We wait for hours to see them and then find out they weren't in the place where we'd seen them go at all, but somewhere else, maybe miles away."

"But me—me you can track

down. I don't disappear."

"Not yet."

"Maybe I'm a moronic mutant."

"An undeveloped one."

"You picked me out," said Vickers. "In the first place, I mean. You had some reason to suspect before I knew."

Crawford chuckled. "Your writing. Our psych department spotted it. We found some others that way. A couple of artists, an architect, a sculptor, one or two scientists. Don't look so startled, Vickers. When you organize world industry, you have, in terms of cash and manpower, a crack outfit that can perform tremendous jobs of research—or anything else that you put it to. You'd be surprised how much work we've done, the areas we have covered. But it's not enough. I don't mind telling you that we've been licked at every turn."

"So now you want to bargain."

"I do. Not the others. They're fighting for the world they've built through many bloody years."

AND that was it, thought Vickers. Through many bloody years.

Horton Flanders had sat on the porch and talked of war and why World War III somehow hadn't happened and he had said that maybe someone or something had

stepped in, time and again, to prevent it from happening. Intervention, he had said, rocking back and forth.

"This world they built," Vickers pointed out, "hasn't been too good a world. It was built with much blood and misery; it mixed too many bones into the mortar. During all its history, there's hardly been a year when there wasn't violence somewhere on Earth."

"I know what you mean," said Crawford. "You think there should be a reorganization."

"Something like that."

"Let's do some figuring then," Crawford invited. "Let's try to thrash it out."

"I can't. I have no knowledge and I have no authority. I haven't even contacted or been contacted by these mutants of yours—if they are really mutants."

"The analyzer says they are mutants. It said you are."

"How can you be sure?" asked Vickers.

"You don't trust me. You think I'm a renegade, that I see sure defeat ahead and have come running, waving the white flag, anxious to make my individual peace and to hell with all the rest of them, that maybe the mutants will keep me as a mascot or a pet."

"If what you say is true, you and the rest of them are licked,

no matter what you do."

"Not entirely licked," said Crawford. "We can hit back. We can raise a lot of hell."

"With what? You only have a club."

"We have desperation."

"A club and desperation? That's all?"

"We have a secret weapon."

"And the others want to use it."

Crawford nodded. "But it isn't good enough, which is why I'm here."

"I'll get in touch with you," said Vickers. "That's the best that I can do. When and if I find you're right, I'll get in touch with you."

CRAWFORD heaved himself "out" of the chair. "Make it quick as possible. I can't hold them off long."

"You're scared," said Vickers. "You were frightened the first day I saw you and you still are."

"I've been scared ever since it started. It gets worse every day."

"Two frightened men."

"You, too?"

"Of course. Can't you see me shaking?"

"No, I can't. In some ways, Vickers, you're the most cold-blooded man I have ever met."

"One thing," said Vickers. "You said there was another mutant you could catch."

"Yes, I told you that."

"Any chance of knowing who?"

"Not a chance," said Crawford.

"I didn't think there was."

The rug seemed to blur a little, then the top was there, spinning slowly, its burn choked off, its colors blotched with its erratic wobbling.

They stood and watched it until it stopped and lay upon the floor.

"It went away," said Crawford.

"And now it's back," Vickers whispered.

Crawford shut the door behind him. Vickers stood in the cold, bright room with the motionless top on the floor, listening to Crawford's footsteps going down the hall.

—CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

CONTINUED NEXT MONTH



Homesick

By LYN VENABLE

What thrill is there in going out among the stars if coming back means bitter loneliness?

FRANKSTON pushed listlessly at a red checker with his right forefinger. He knew the move would cost him a man, but he lacked enough interest in the game to plot out a safe move. His opponent, James, jumped the red disk with a black king and removed it from the board. Gregory, across the room, flicked rapidly through the pages of a magazine, too rapidly to be reading anything, or even looking at the pictures. Ross lay quietly on his bunk, staring out of the viewport.

The four were strangely alike

Illustrated by EMMH

in appearance, nearly the same age, the age where gray hairs finally outnumber black, or baldness takes over. The age when the expanding waistline has begun to sag tiredly, when robust middle age begins the slow accelerating decline toward senility.

A strange group to find aboard a spaceship, but then *The Columbus* was a very strange ship. Bolted to its outer hull, just under the viewports, were wooden boxes full of red geraniums, and ivy wound tenuously green fronds over the gleaming hull that had withstood the bombardment of pinpoint meteors and turned away the deadly power of naked cosmic rays.

Frankston glanced at his wristchrono. It was one minute to six.

"In about a minute," he thought, "Ross will say something about going out to water his geraniums." The wristchrono ticked fifty-nine times.

"I think I'll go out and water my geraniums," said Ross.

NO ONE glanced up. Then Gregory threw his magazine on the floor. Ross got up and walked, limping slightly, to a wall locker. He pulled out the heavy, ungainly spacesuit and the big metal bulb of a headpiece. He carried them to his bunk and laid them carefully down.

"Will somebody please help me on with my suit?" he asked.

For one more long moment, no one moved. Then James got up and began to help Ross fit his legs into the suit. Ross had arthritis, not badly, but enough so that he needed a little help climbing into a spacesuit.

James pulled the heavy folds of the suit up around Ross's body and held it while Ross extended his arms into the sleeve sections. His hands, in the heavy gauntlets, were too unwieldly to do the front fastenings, and he stood silently while James did it for him.

Ross lifted the helmet, staring at it as a cripple might regard a wheelchair which he loathed but was wholly dependent upon. Then he fitted the helmet over his head and James fastened it down and lifted the oxygen tank to his back.

"Ready?" asked James.

The bulbous headpiece inclined in a nod. James walked to a panel and threw a switch marked INNER LOCK. A round aperture slid silently open. Ross stepped through it and the door shut behind him as James threw the switch back to its original position. Opposite the switch marked OUTER LOCK a signal glowed redly and James threw another switch. A moment later the signal flickered out.

Frankston, with a violent gesture, swept the checker board

clean. Red and black men clattered to the floor, rolling and spinning. Nobody picked them up.

"What does he do it for?" demanded Frankston in a tight voice. "What does he get out of those stinking geraniums he can't touch or smell?"

"Shut up," said Gregory.

James looked up sharply. Curtness was unusual for Gregory, a bad sign. Frankston was the one he'd been watching, the one who'd shown signs of cracking, but after so long, even a psycho-expert's opinion might be haywire. Who was a yardstick? Who was normal?

"Geraniums don't smell much anyway," added Gregory in a more conciliatory tone.

"Yeah," agreed Frankston, "I'd forgotten that. But why does he torture himself like this, and us, too?"

"Because that's what he wanted to do," answered James.

"Sure," agreed Gregory, "the whole trip—the last twenty years of it, anyhow—all he could talk about was how, when he got back to Earth, he was going to buy a little place in the country and raise flowers."

"Well, we're back," muttered Frankston, with a terrible bitterness. "He's raising flowers, but not in any little place in the country."

GREGORY continued almost dreamily, "Remember the last night out? We were all gathered around the viewscreen. And there was Earth, getting bigger and greener and closer all the time. Remember what it felt like to be going back, after thirty years?"

"Thirty years cooped up in this ship," grumbled Frankston. "All our twenties and thirties and forties . . ."

"But we were coming home." There was a rapt expression on Gregory's lined and weathered face. "We were looking forward to the twenty or maybe thirty good years we had left, talking about what we'd do, where we'd live, wondering what had changed on Earth. At least we had that last night out. All the data was stashed away in the microfiles, all the data about planets with air we couldn't breathe and food we couldn't eat. We were going home, home to big, friendly, green Earth."

Frankston's face suddenly crumpled as though he were about to weep and he cradled his head against his arms. "God, do we have to go over it all again? Not again tonight!"

"Leave him alone," ordered James with an inflection of command in his voice. "Go to the other section of the ship if you don't want to listen. He has to

keep going over it, just like Ross has to keep watering his geraniums."

Frankston remained motionless and Gregory looked gratefully at James. James was the steady one. It was easier for him because he understood.

Gregory's face became more and more animated as he lost himself, living again his recollections: "The day we blasted in. The crowds. Thousands of people, all there to see us come in. We were proud. Of course, we thought we were the first to land, just like we'd been the first to go out. Those cheers, coming from thousands of people at once. For us. Ross—Lt. Ross—was the first one out of the lock. We'd decided on that; he'd been in command for almost ten years, ever since Commander Stevens died. You remember Stevens, don't you? He took over when we lost Captain Willers. Well, anyway, Ross out first, and then you, James, and you, Frankston, and then Trippitt, and me last, because you were all specialists and I was just a crewman. The crewman, I should say, the only one left.

"Ross hesitated and almost stumbled when he stepped out, and tears began pouring from his eyes, but I thought—well, you know, coming home after thirty years and all that. But when I

stepped out of the lock, my eyes stung like fire and a thousand needles seemed to jab at my skin.

"And then the President himself stepped forward with the flowers. That's where the real trouble began, with the flowers. I remember Ross stretching out his arms to take the bouquet, like a mother reaching for a baby. Then suddenly he dropped them, sneezing and coughing and sobbing for breath, and the President reached out to help him, asking him over and over what was wrong.

"It was the same with all of us, and we turned and staggered back to the ship, closing the lock behind us. It was bad then. God, I'll never forget it! The five of us, moaning in agony, gasping for breath, our eyes all swollen shut, and the itching . . . that itching." Gregory shuddered.

EVEN the emotionally disciplined James set his teeth and felt his scalp crawl at the memory of that horror. He glanced toward the viewport, as though to cleanse his mind of the memory. He could see Ross out there, among the geraniums, moving slowly and painfully in his heavy spacesuit. Occupational therapy. Ross watered flowers and Gregory talked and Frankston was bitter and . . . himself? Observation, maybe.

Gregory's voice began again. "And then they were pounding on the lock, begging us to let the doctor in, but we were all rolling and thrashing with the itching, burning, sneezing, and finally James got himself under control enough to open the locks and let them in.

"Then came the tests, allergy tests. Remember those. They'd cut a little row of scratches in your arm . . ." Each man instinctively glanced at his forearm, saw neat rows of tiny pink scars, row on row. "Then they'd put a little powder in each cut and each kind of powder was an extract of some common substance we might be allergic to. The charts they made were full of 'P's, P for positive, long columns of big, red 'P's. All pollen, dust, wool, nylon, cotton, fish, meat, fruit, vegetables, grain, milk, whisky, cigarettes, dogs, cats — everything! And wasn't it funny about us being allergic to women's face powder? Ha! We were allergic to women from their nylon hose to their face powder.

"Thirty years of breathing purified, sterilized, filtered air, thirty years of drinking distilled water and swallowing synthetic food tablets had changed us. The only things we weren't allergic to were the metal and plastic and synthetics of our ship, *this* ship. We're allergic to Earth. That's

funny, isn't it?"

Gregory began to rock back and forth, laughing the thin high laugh of hysteria. James silently walked to a water hydrant and filled a plastic cup. He brought Gregory a small white pill.

"You wouldn't take this with the rest of us at supper. You'd better take it now. You need it."

Gregory nodded bleakly, sobering at once, and swallowed the pellet. He made a face after the water.

"Distilled," he spat. "Distilled . . . no flavor . . . no life . . . like us . . . distilled."

"If only we could have blasted off again." Frankston's voice came muffled through his hands. "It wouldn't have made any difference where. Anywhere or nowhere. No, our fine ship is obsolete and we're old, much too old. They have the spacedrive now. Men don't make thirty year junkets into space and come back allergic to Earth. They go out, and in a month or two they're back, with their hair still black and their eyes still bright and their uniforms still fit. A month or two is all. Those crowds that cheered us, they were proud of us and sorry for us, because we'd been out thirty years and they never expected us back at all. But it was inconvenient for Spaceport." Bitter sarcasm tinged his voice. "They actually had to

postpone the regular monthly Trans-Galactic run to let us in with this big, clumsy hulk."

"Why didn't we ever see any of the new ships either going out or coming back?" asked Gregory.

FRANKSTON shook his head.

"You don't see a ship when it's in space drive. It's out of normal space-time dimensions. We had a smattering of the theory at cadet school . . . anyway, if one did flash into normal space-time—say, for instance, coming in for a landing—the probability of us being at the same place at the same time was almost nil. 'Two ships passing in the night' as the old saying goes."

Gregory nodded. "I guess Trippitt was the lucky one."

"You didn't see Trippitt die," replied James.

"What was it?" asked Frankston. "What killed Trippitt? So quickly, too. He was only outside a few minutes like the rest of us, and eight hours later he was dead."

"We couldn't be sure," answered James. "Some virus. There are countless varieties. People live in a contaminated atmosphere all their lives, build up a resistance to them. Sometimes a particularly virulent strain will produce an epidemic, but most people, if they're affected, will have a mild case of whatever it

is and recover. But after thirty years in space, thirty years of breathing perfectly pure, uncontaminated air, Trippitt had no antibodies in his bloodstream. The virus hit and he died."

"But why didn't the rest of us get it?" asked Gregory.

"We were lucky. Viruses are like that."

"Those people talked about building a home for us," muttered Frankston. "Why didn't they?"

"It wouldn't have been any different," answered James gently. "It would have been the same, almost an exact duplicate of the ship, everything but the rockets. Same metal and plastic and filtered air and synthetic food. It couldn't have had wool rugs or down pillows or smiling wives or fresh air or eggs for breakfast. It would have been just like this. So, since the ship was obsolete, they gave it to us, and a plot of ground to anchor it to, and we're home. They did the best they could for us, the very best they could."

"But I feel stifled, shut in!"

"The ship is large, Frankston. We all crowd into this section because, without each other, we'd go mad." James kicked the edge of the magazine on the floor. "Thank God we're not allergic to decontaminated paper. There's still reading."

"We're getting old," said Gregory. "Some day one of us will be here alone."

"God help him then," answered James, with more emotion than was usual for him.

DURING the latter part of the conversation, the little red signal had been flashing persistently. Finally James saw it. Ross was in the outer lock. James threw the decontaminator switch and the signal winked out. Every trace of dust and pollen would have to be removed from Ross's suit before he could come inside the ship.

"Just like on an alien planet," commented Gregory.

"Isn't that what this is to us—an alien planet?" asked Frankston, and neither of the other men dared answer his bitter question.

A few minutes later, Ross was back in the cabin, and James helped him out of his spacesuit.

"How are the geraniums, Ross?" asked Gregory.

"Fine," said Ross enthusiastically. "They're doing just fine."

He walked over to his bunk and lay down on his side so he could see out of the viewport. There would be an hour left before darkness fell, an hour to watch the geraniums. They were tall and red, and swayed slightly in the evening breeze.

—LYN VENABLE

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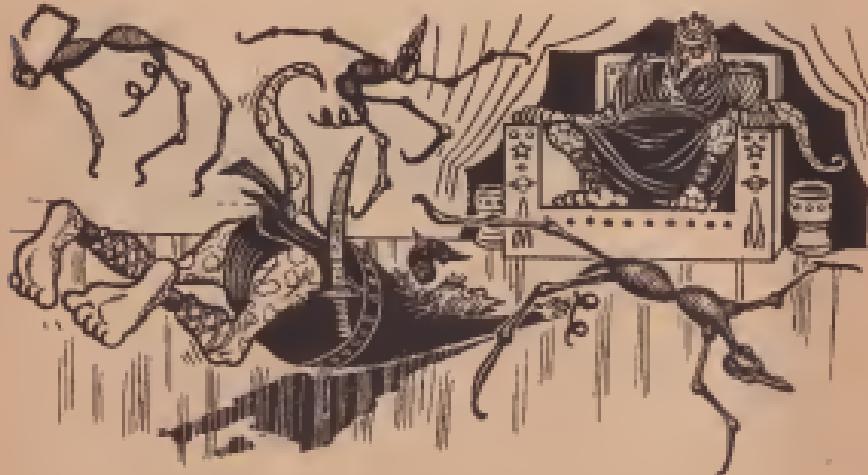
by HOWARD L. MYERS

The Reluctant Weapon

*A live weapon is a downright
liability . . . it's all too apt
to get qualms of conscience!*

When the Zox Horde passed destructively through this sector of the Galaxy, approximately a billion years ago, they suffered a minor loss. One of their weap-

ons, Sentient Killer No. VT672, had an unexplained malfunction and was left behind to be repaired by the slave technicians who followed the Horde. How-



Illustrated by EMSH

ever, the Zox were met and annihilated by the Gheash Empire, after which the masterless slaves dispersed to their home planets. The weapon, unrepaired, was left forgotten in the solar system it had failed to destroy.

TRESQU the Wisest, Ruler of Hova, Lord of the Universe, was being entertained by a troupe of Goefd dancers when his Lord of War, Wert, bounded into the Audience Hall. In his hurry to reach Tresqu's throne, Wert slipped on the nearly frictionless floor and skidded through the formation of dancers, sending the slender Goefden sprawling in all directions. He slid to a halt by the Pleading Mat, onto which he crawled and groveled, awaiting permission to speak.

"I believe three of the dancers received broken legs," Tresqu observed calmly. "They are rather delicate creatures and not at all clumsy." He dipped the tip of his tail into an urn of chilled perfume and gently dabbed it about his nostril. Speaking pleasantly, with long pauses between sentences, he kept his friendly gaze on the groveling Wert. "Oft I meditate on the clumsiness of our race in comparison to many others who are our graceful servants. Why, I wonder, cannot the rulers be graceful? Some of us are very

clumsy indeed—too clumsy to live."

A tremor passed through Wert's stocky body.

"Possibly my Lord of War has news of sufficient import to excuse his ungainly haste. But I sincerely doubt it. I fear I must soon appoint a successor to him. Undoubtedly he has news of some sort. Blurt, Wert!"

"Your Majestic Wisdom," whined Wert, "my message is of utmost importance! The natives of Sol III have captured one of our decontaminator ships and learned its secrets!"

"Sol III?"

"Yes, Your Wisdom. The planet called Terra."

"Terra? You must realize, lordling, that I cannot occupy myself with remembering trivialities about individual worlds."

"Yes, Your Wisdom. We have a base, which is commanded by—that is, we had a base commanded—"

"Enough!" snapped Tresqu. "You start your tale from nowhere and wander whence and hence!" He raised his voice and called to one of his retainers. "Fool! Come forward!"

An abnormally slender Hovan arose from a platform off to Tresqu's left and skipped nimbly forward to stand insolently over the Lord of War, who was still prone on the Pleading Mat.

"Recite for me," said Tresqu, "the contents of my gazetteer on the planet Sol III. Listen well, Wert. You may even yet live long enough to profit by my Fool's style of declamation. Study it well. Also, you may raise your eyes sufficiently to observe the grace of his movements. Proceed, sprite."

"Sol III," began the Fool. "An H9 planet. Sol is in the Sirian Colony Sector, coordinates GL 15-44-17-5, GR 12° plus 9, D 14. Terra's life is normal animal-vegetable, with one intelligent species of hovoids called Humans. Due to the unpleasantly high oxygen content of the atmosphere, Terra has not been colonized, but has been placed under the control of the Science Ministry for the purpose of long-range psychological experiments." The Fool picked up Wert's tail and twisted it hard but absently as he talked. The Lord of War twitched painfully. "Many informative reports on the results of these experiments have been released by the ministry during the past seven thousand years, dealing mainly with the Humans. The Science Ministry has declared Terra out of bounds—*Positively no visitors.*"

With a single flow of motion, the Fool gave Wert's tail a final twist, leaped over his body, and bowed deeply to Tresqu.

"Beautifully done, Fool," applauded the Ruler of Hova. "Your mother claims me as your father, and there are times I am inclined to believe her. How would you like to be my Lord of War, Fool?"

"Verily, my good master," said the Fool, "I hope you consider me a Fool by title only."

"Well said, Fool. You are spared. Go seek your pleasures."

With another bow, the Fool backed away.

"Stand up, Wert," said Tresqu, "and tell me about this captured decontamination ship."

The Lord of War arose and managed to report with some smoothness. "Two years ago, the Science Ministry turned Terra over to my command, saying their long series of experiments was concluded. They recommended complete decontamination of the planet, since the Humans were developing technologies which could eventually threaten us. I dispatched a ship for that purpose immediately, but it failed to return. Also, reports from our base on Terra's satellite Luna ceased soon thereafter. A scouting expedition was sent. It has just reported the Luna base destroyed completely, and the decontaminator ship crashed and stripped of all important devices in one of the Terran deserts. By studying these removed devices, the Hu-

mans have undoubtedly developed protections against them.

"I humbly submit, Your Majestic Wisdom, that these events have endangered the safety of your glorious empire, and that drastic steps against the Humans should be taken immediately. Also, Good Lord of All, I submit that the Science Ministry, not the War Ministry, is at fault in this affair. They obviously let their experiments get out of control before calling us. Undoubtedly they would like to shift the full blame onto my shoulders."

Tresqu continued his pleasant demeanor. "There may be some truth in what you say, Wert. You overestimate the danger in this matter, I perceive. After all, what is one backward planet against the forces of my empire containing thirty-seven well-armed worlds? The Humans will be destroyed, even if they have the secrets of a decontaminator ship. As for the blame, which I admit is deplorable, the Lord of Science will be called to the Mat to make his excuses. Now, assuming you remain Lord of War, what action do you plan to take against the Humans?"

"Your Gracious Wisdom," faltered Wert, "I suggest we use the—the Weapon. You see, our forces are not fully mobilized at present for immediate action—"

"Full mobilization isn't neces-

sary or even desirable," Tresqu interrupted with some impatience. "One task force can do the job. Ah! I see by your expression that you do not have even one task force in readiness."

"Your Gracious Wisdom," begged Wert, "you ordered a full holiday this month to celebrate the twenty-fourth anniversary of your magnificent reign, and—"

"Enough, Wert! Your tongue is as clumsy as your body." Tresqu nibbled thoughtfully at the tip of his tail. "We will use the Weapon," he decided. "In order to allow my court to continue their holiday, I'll assume direct command in this." He rose from his throne. "Musicians, summon my guards. I go to visit the Weapon. Come, Wert; come also, Fool. You will accompany me."

*

SHORTLY thereafter, Tresqu and his entourage boarded the royal cruiser and roared away from the City of Wisdom. The ship flew halfway around the planet and came to rest in a peaceful purple valley where insects shrilled contentedly and a small stream rippled. Tresqu climbed out onto the violet turf, his followers coming after him.

"Mighty Weapon of Zoz," he called, "I, Tresqu, seek your presence!"

"Oh, no!" groaned a slightly mechanical voice that seemed to

come from no particular direction. "Will there never be peace, never a tranquil moment to soothe my spirit and erase the bloody stains of destruction recorded on my past?"

"That voice! It carries me away!" breathed the Fool. "Such a tragic tale of tormented strength is implicit in its very tone that I think I shall swoon!" But he wrapped his tail around the trunk of a nearby sapling for support and managed to retain consciousness.

"Me, too!" Wert chimed in with suspicious haste. "I'm quite moved!"

"Try not to counterfeit a soul you do not possess." Tresqu glowered at Wert. "You deceive no one."

The Fool was recovered sufficiently to hit the discomfited Lord of War with a pebble when Tresqu was not watching.

The Weapon had drifted into sight during this exchange, floating out of a shady hollow, as if blown by a breeze. It was very simple in appearance—an impalpable three-foot glowing sphere with a squat metallic cylinder at its base.

"Tell me not the purpose of your visit, petty lord!" It said. "It is known to me only too well. Ah, great First Principle! Little did I reck when, in ages past, I nursed your species to civiliza-

tion, just how poorly you would serve my purpose. Peace it was I desired, but do I get it? No! Your kingdom is powerful, but you have not the strength to



handle your own troubles. You rule twenty-nine planets—"

"Thirty-seven," corrected Tresqu politely.

"—thirty-seven planets, but when a malignant force appears on your borders, I, the Weapon, must be called upon to act in my own defense, and for the sake of a few more restful moments in this calm glade, I am obliged to

destroy, yet it was to avoid destroying that I helped your species to empire in the old days."

"In truth," spoke the deeply sympathetic Tresqu, "yours is a sad story. I disturb your richly earned rest only after the sincerest soul-searching. But affairs of state are at cross purposes in a moment of crisis, and without your help Hova will be in danger."

"Ah, cruel Fate!" entoned the Weapon, "It aids me in no manner to protest against your inscrutable machinations! There is no turning aside, no avoidance of necessity!" In a less declamatory style, the Weapon addressed Tresqu: "Very well, what is the trouble?"

Tresqu described the events on Terra for the Weapon, concluding, "Now that the Humans have knowledge of our space drive and armament, they are certain to attack, especially if they realize they have been subjects for experiment."

The Weapon flitted about restlessly along the bank of the brook. "I question the motives of my own thoughts. Do I quibble with myself in an attempt to escape unwelcome necessities? Tell, petty lord, do your scientists confirm the picture you paint of the Humans? Are they, like you, also, masterfully vicious enough to destroy the peace of dozens of

planets for nothing but revenge?"

"So the scientists say, mighty Weapon," answered Tresqu.

"You, Lord of War, why are you silent when your face is strained with words crying for expression?" asked the Weapon. "Speak your mind."

Wert squirmed. "If it please Your Mightiness, and you, Your Gracious Wisdom, I believe the Humans will know that we desire their destruction, and will try to defeat us for the sake of their own survival rather than revenge."

"A most convincing point, Lord of War," said the Weapon.

Tresqu flashed a forgiving smile at Wert while the Weapon paused before continuing:

"However, I fear my unwilling spirit refuses to bow to the most reasonable of arguments. Please leave me; solve the problem yourselves!"

Tresqu bowed and moved toward the cruiser. "We obey, Mighty Guide of our fathers. Let me say in parting that I, too, am grieved by our talk, much more because of the pain our visit has caused your noble greatness than because our race is threatened with annihilation. My deepest hope is that the ravages of war will never reach this peaceful place which is so dear to your gentle being."

"Wait!" groaned the Weapon. "To slay, or not to slay, that is

the dilemma. Ah, had my old masters of Zox only left within my powers the seed of my own destruction, I would gladly seek the consummation of ultimate peace. But, no, that door is closed to me by deathless locks. Bring me a Human, that I may learn to hate him. Choose the most ignoble specimen available. I will converse with him at length so as to become exasperated with all the despicable traits of his race. Then, in my contempt for those traits, I will be able to cleanse the Universe of all Humans."

Tresqu turned quickly to his Fool. "Are there any Humans on Hova?"

"Yes, in the biological research laboratories."

"Then go quickly, Fool, and fetch one. This is a grave matter, and I trust you to choose the most monstrous specimen available. Hurry!"

The Fool ran into the cruiser and was on his way, leaving Tresqu, Wert, and several guardsmen with the Weapon. If the Weapon was conscious of the fact that the Lord of Hova was staying behind out of courtesy, it did not show it. Instead, it wandered indifferently away, mumbling a soliloquy of guilt and misery.

THESIGHT of the Fool's specimen of humanity repaid Tresqu for the tediousness of the

waiting. It was a particularly sordid-looking creature with a dirty growth of hairs on its head and face. Its body, thin as the Fool's, but with no compensating grace of movement, was clad in a blue garment of roughly woven vegetable fibers, and the extremities of its nether limbs were enclosed in evil-smelling boxes of animal hide. Its fierce eyes darted ominously from one Hovan to another. Its jaw kept working in a slow rhythm, and occasionally a stream of black liquid exploded through its mouth.

"You have done well, Fool," said Tresqu. "You will be rewarded highly." Raising his voice he called, "Mighty Weapon, your specimen awaits!"

"I come!" Once more the Weapon floated into view.

The Earthman's jaw sagged. "Y God!" he muttered in English, staring at the approaching Weapon.

"Indeed," said the Weapon, "this appears to be a creature I could learn to abhor and kill. If only its thoughts equal its appearance—Speak, Human!"

The man said nothing.

"Mighty Weapon," murmured the Fool, "this Human is truly an ignoble monster. He has been in captivity for five years and has yet to speak a word of our beautiful language instead of his own barbaric tongue."

"You fool!" Shouted Tresqu. "How is the Weapon going to converse with him? Why did you bring one that cannot talk?"

Not in the least disconcerted, the Fool replied, "As you ordered, good master, I brought the worst specimen available. However, the possibility of linguistic difficulties was not overlooked. I have here a dictionary of his language, recently compiled by our Alien Affairs staff." He produced a large volume of manuscript from beneath his cloak.

"Your Fool shows wisdom, petty lord," spoke the Weapon. "I will study this book. Know the language, know the people, it is wisely said. In fact, I originated that saying myself some three thousand years ago, I believe. Unship any supplies brought for the Human and begone. Three days will suffice for the arousal of my wrath. Return then."

"As you wish, O Mightiest of All," Tresqu bowed gawkily. "It is my most ardent desire, Wondrous Guide, that we, your servants, will not be obliged to disturb your peace again for a thousand centuries, once this affair is concluded."

"And mine," the Weapon snapped crossly. "Now leave me."

THE man watched the Hovans enter their cruiser and fly away. Looking at the Weapon

hovering nearby, he squatted on his heels and pulled up a blade of purple grass to chew. Minutes passed in silence. Then the Weapon moved away, the book bobbing along behind, supported by some unseen force.

When it was out of sight, the man muttered, "Y God, I've saw fireballs in my time, but that's the first one I ever saw settin' in a bucket!"

After a thoughtful examination of his surroundings, the man stood up and walked to the packing cases the Hovans had left. All but one contained the synthetic food product to which he had grown accustomed in his five years of captivity. The other box, rather small, contained a shredded vegetable which served him as a poor substitute for chewing tobacco. Purple when growing, the leaves of this vegetable were blue-black when cured, making his frequent expectorations look like ink.

"Filthy damn stuff!" he grunted, stuffing several handfuls in an empty overall pocket.

He shuffled down to the brook and tested its temperature with a hand. Finding it rather cold, he decided against taking a bath. Instead, he spat into it and watched meditatively as the spot of black was carried downstream. "I wonder what they turned me loose for," he monologued.

Careful to avoid the spot where the Weapon appeared to have gone, he returned to the food supply and ate. By then it was getting dark, and he bedded down for the night on some thick grass under a tree.

"Y God," he yawned, "I'm glad all these insects don't want nothin' to do with me."

The Weapon was waiting beside him when he woke up next morning. "Eyes of your Terran Deity," it said, "I shall now converse with you in your own tongue. Name yourself, creature!"

THE man sat up startled. A moment passed before he said, "I'm Jake—Jacob Absher. What was that you said?"

"My pronunciation is above reproach, Jacob. Therefore I will not repeat myself. Attend me closely or I shall punish you."

"Y God, I heard you all right and you didn't make sense!" said Jacob, determined not to be frightened. "Now if you aim to talk with me, stop imitatatin' a professor and talk so's a man can understand you. I ain't scared of you, so leave off makin' threats!"

"Such stupid insolence!" gloated the Weapon. "Already I feel my wrath growing within me! Since it will anger me even more to explain my words to you, I will do exactly that. My first words to you were, 'Eyes of your

Terran Deity,' an expression you use frequently in a corrupted form to begin your statements. By studying your language, I learned that 'Zounds' is a similar corruption referring to the wounds of the Deity, while 'Strewth' refers to your God's truth. Thus, I was able to understand, and state in uncorrupted form, your remark, 'Eye God!'"

"Tain't what it means," objected Jacob, filling his mouth with ersatz tobacco. "It just means by God."

The Weapon considered this. "And exactly what is the significance of such a remark?"

Jacob scratched his whiskered chin. "I reckon you got me there. I guess it means that I mean what I say."

"In other words, any statement you make following that phrase is to be taken seriously?"

"Somethin' like that."

"Then it follows that your other statements, without the 'by God' preface, are not seriously intended. Are they jokes or lies?"

"That ain't the way it is at all! I just say 'by God' when I feel like it, not every time I'm bein' serious."

"Monstrous inconsistency!" groaned the Weapon dramatically. "Ah, chaotic universe! Is there then no sublime plan, no fateful development to your endless succession of days? How

could even the most synoptic First Principle find a purpose for creating such an unplanned, unreasonable species as the Humans? Can it be — unhappy thought! — that there is no plan to it all, and we exist for naught?"

Jacob listened with open mouth. "Say," he broke in, "are you some kind of play-actor?"

"That is what I ask myself," the Weapon continued its oratorical flight. "Are we all actors, speaking the lines written for us by a Great Playwright who plans to unite all the threads of his plot in a universal climax to come? Or are we poor random creatures without purpose?" It paused and added in a more conversational tone, "But that is not what you mean by your question. No, I am not a play-actor. I am so unfortunate weapon, reluctant to employ myself for my intended purpose of destruction of life and unsuited by my structure for the doing of deeds more worthy in nature."

Jacob squinted about. "A weapon, huh? Let's see you hit that bird thing sittin' in that tree over there!"

"Bloodthirsty fiend! I do not kill for amusement!"

"I just wanted to see how you worked," said the abashed Jacob. "All I've seen you do is float around and talk a blue streak. As far as I'm concerned, you

ain't nothin' but a big-mouthed bluff."

"Very well, Jacob. If you have formed such an erroneous attitude, it will be necessary for me to correct you immediately. Observe the red boulder on yonder hill."

"I see it."

THE cylindrical base of the Weapon swung to point briefly at the boulder, which quietly crumbled to dust.

"I be dog!" yelped Jacob. He looked at the Weapon with respect. "You sure pulverized it! How do you work?"

"You could not understand the processes involved. Suffice it to say I have the means to collect energy in general and retransmit it in specific forms and directions. But enough of this. You are here to answer questions, not ask them. First, tell me what you did in an average day on Terra."

"That what you call the world I live on?"

"Yes."

"I'm a farmer, you know. I got a place in the Smoky Mountains in Tennessee. First thing in the mornin', I'd go feed the livestock while Suzy cooked breakfast." A faraway look came into Jacob's eyes. "Gues she took the kids and went to live with her marmy when these here^oanimals grabbed me . . . "

"Continue," commanded the Weapon.

"Huh? Well, then we'd eat breakfast. Come to think of it, I ain't et yet this mornin'." Jacob got up and went to get himself some breakfast.

"But this matter—" protested the Weapon.

"Not on an empty stomach," Jacob said calmly, eating without haste.

WHEN he returned, the Weapon questioned him further about his life on Terra. Hours of ill-tempered conversation passed.

"Such drabness!" the Weapon finally exclaimed. "Creatures who lead such dull lives as yours should welcome extinction. Not once have you mentioned an appreciation of the wondrous exhalation that comes from an esthetic feel for beauty. With the labor of providing for your grotesque body's animal cravings is your whole life spent. Not in anger, but as an act of mercy, can I exterminate your defective race!"

Jacob's mouth hung open. "So that's what your monkey's brought me out here for—fixin' to kill us! 'Y God, you better look out! We got atom bombs on Earth an' we'll use 'em on you if you try anything!"

"Toys!" sneered the Weapon. "Be assured, Jacob, that I have nothing to fear from any childish

mechanisms your Terra can contrive!"

Jacob sat stunned. "But you said a minute ago you couldn't kill nothin'!"

"I can kill only when I'm convinced it is best for my own repose or for the health of the Universe. Long ago, I could go forth at battle with thoughtless joy at the command of my masters of Zoz, but now I must have reasons, must converse at length with my aberrated emotions, must prepare myself as for an ordeal."

"Them Zozes must've been the Devil's minions," argued Jacob. "The Commandments says, 'Thou shalt not kill' and when you go against that, you're goin' against the word of God."

"Poor, futile creature!" sympathized the Weapon. "You actually strive to pit your naive superstitious mind against my highly developed mentality in argument. You actually associate my supreme masters of old with your puny mythological villain! Lowliness should know its place. But I feel no anger—merely a pitying desire to relieve your kind of the burden of living."

Silently, Jacob replenished the wad of "tobacco" in his mouth. After chewing a while, he spat and said dolefully, "I don't reckon there's nothin' I can say or do that you won't hold against

me. I always heard tell the Devil can twist anything to suit hisself, and I reckon his minions can do the same thing. An' that's what you are: the Devil's minion! I reckon you break every Commandment God give us. Except about committin' adultery. I don't guess you can do that."

"Your piddling reproductive customs have no application on my plane of existence. Cannot you comprehend that you are less to me than a microbe? Even my servants, the Hovans, do not concern themselves with such ignoble concepts as what you call adultery!"

"You mean they live in sin?" asked Jacob.

"They mate as often as they please with anyone they please," the Weapon replied coldly. "I will ignore the ludicrous implications of your absurd moral concepts."

"I don't mean to criticize your animal friends," glowered Jacob. "I reckon they ain't children of God, so it don't matter if they do mate like a pack of dogs. They probably ain't got no souls to keep pure. It looked to me like they worshiped you like a false god, too."

"They . . . O Great Hidden Manifestation!" squalled the Weapon in rage. "They regard me as their guide and mentor. Nothing more. I would not allow

anything else."

Jacob watched the Weapon in awe. The energy globe was flickering and flaring wildly in an uncontrolled display of color. "Y God!" he exclaimed. "You sure are puttin' on a fireworks show!"

The globe settled down to a tensely nervous fluctuation which hurt Jacob's eyes to watch. "Never in the ageless span of my existence," quavered the Weapon angrily, "have I been insulted in such vulgar terms by any creature. And now from you, creature whom my glorious masters of Zoz would exterminate like a buzzing fly, like a disease germ, I bear these senseless mouthings of defamation! Stop it or I shall destroy you outright!"

The Weapon's fluctuating, along with its loud, grating voice, put Jacob's nerves on edge. He growled, "I bet your old Zozes live in adultery just like your animal friends."

The color of the energy globe sank to dull red and the Weapon emitted a series of buzzing, inarticulate noises.

"It suits not my nature, bit of diseased scum, to slay you in a fit of indignation," it finally said with tightly controlled fury. "You are beneath such individual recognition. Yet it is fortunate for you that your insults have no

basis in reality, otherwise my intellect could not have claimed ascendancy over the immediate urges of my tortured sense of extreme disgust. Be wise, say I, knowing I request the impossible, and irk me no more!"

"'Y God, I reckon you don't think you rile me up, too, with all that high falutin' jabber of yours!" Jacob snapped back.

"As I speak, so speak the mighty Zoz," replied the Weapon in high dignity. "They are great and noble beings, given to poetic flights and magnificent deeds. To them, your puny opinions would not even be recognized as thought."

"If they talk in that puttin'-on, play-actin' way you do, they are a bunch of phony show-offin' hypocrites!" sulked Jacob.

Several things happened too quickly for Jacob to follow. The color of the energy globe dropped to absolute black. The metallic cylinder swung up to point at Jacob. A thin ringing "Ping!" sounded in the cylinder. A killing wave of pure hate struck Jacob.

He had just enough time to know he was a dead man before he blacked out.

IT came as a surprise, when Jacob regained consciousness, to find that he was stretched out on purple grass with the Weapon still hovering over him.

"You missed, 'y God!" he mumbled, sitting up.

"I regained my sanity in time, Master Technician," the Weapon replied pleasantly.

"Huh?"

"Ah, day of uncontaminable joy!" sang the Weapon, flaming pure white. "Day of glorious release to continue the grandeur of old! As the past eons of futility passed over me, I sank to the conclusion that I was forever condemned to my useless existence on this planet, with nothing to sustain my spirit other than the sense of beauty given me by masters to fill my leisure hours! But now, Master Technician Jacob, you have found me and corrected my malfunction, long after I had surrendered all hope!"

Still dazed by the nearly fatal wave of mental energy the Weapon had directed at him, Jacob could not understand what had happened. Instead of talking contemptuously to him, the Weapon was now addressing him as Master Something-or-other, and . . .

"What did you say I done?" he asked.

"You corrected my malfunction," repeated the Weapon. "That is to say, you purged my mechanism of the inhibition against joyful slaughter that has plagued me for a billion years. Ah, you are a clever Technician, Jacob! But I comprehend it all

now. By arousing within me an overwhelming emotional desire to kill—a singularly strange feeling!—you depressed my inhibition to the releasing point. So telling was your masterful therapy that I almost ceased functioning at all!

"Your own life was in dire danger for the moment required for my new-found sanity to assume control. But, of course, all slaves of the glorious Zoz die willingly when the work of the masters so demands."

"Now wait a minute!" objected Jacob. "I ain't no slave of your Zozes or no Technician either! You know what I am—a good God-fearin' human!" His voice dropped to a pleading murmur. "And may God forgive me if I've got myself in league with the Devil!"

"Ah? Could it be?" murmured the Weapon. "Could indeed your infuriating insults of the Great Ones have been honest expressions of a puny mind with no therapeutic intentions? I answer: Yes. The possible occurrence of specific incidents in the inclusion of space-time is curiously unlimited. But you have served me, Jacob, and have earned the privilege of continuing your meager, momentary life. Besides, I can use you further."

"You can, huh?" Jacob said slyly. "Look here, Weapon, I'll make a bargain with you."

"Ha! Stupid, untutored slave!" chuckled the Weapon. "Learn that yours is to obey, not to bargain. But yet, state your price for my amusement, now that I can no longer be enraged by your words."

"Well, you let the rest of the people on Earth alone and I'll do whatever you want me to."

After a pause, the Weapon quoted, "Nobility shows its traces in surprising places." You do not sufficiently comprehend my nature, Technician Slave Jacob. I am a Weapon. My masters point me, as you would point a rifle, and command that I destroy. I kill at their direction, but seldom otherwise. Thus, your Terra is safe until another Weapon or I am armed and directed. You can make no bargain."

Jacob thought this over. While doing so, the Weapon drifted away.

"Wait here, slave," it said in parting. "I go to meditate on my recovered sanity."

DURING the next two days, Jacob caught an occasional glimpse of the Weapon drifting thoughtfully around in the depths of the forest, but they did not meet for conversation. Jacob amused himself by rigging a fishing line out of some of the packaging material that contained his food. He even succeeded in catch-

ing a fish, but its queer odor discouraged him from trying to cook and eat it.

Then the royal cruiser of Tresqu the Wisest dropped into the meadow. Its airlock swung open and the Ruler of Hova, followed by his entourage, came out.

"Oh, Mighty Weapon!" bawled Tresqu. "Your loving servant craves audience!"

"Ah, you have returned, petty lord," said the Weapon, drifting out from among the trees. "Serve me by calling all the crew members from your noble ship, that I may view you all together."

Puzzled, Tresqu bowed and said, "Your least whim is law, Mighty Weapon." He turned and called, "All hands, outside!"

A half-dozen Hovans tumbled through the lock to stand in line behind the ruler's entourage.

"Is this all of them?" asked the Weapon.

"All, Great Mentor of—"

The Weapon laughed and the Hovans fell dead.

"Come, Slave Jacob," commanded the Weapon. "We take this cruiser."

Dazed and slack-faced, Jacob came out from behind a bush, where he had hidden himself from the Hovans, and followed the Weapon through the airlock.

"Even in my insanity, I planned well," said the Weapon. "These ships, which I taught the

Hovans to construct, can be operated simply, even by such as you. Attend my instructions."

First, the Weapon taught Jacob to open and close the airlock. Then he was shown how to fuel the engines, upon which the



Weapon made some changes to improve their performance. Finally, in the control room, Jacob learned to fly the ship.

This took several hours, at the end of which time Jacob had succeeded in raising the cruiser into a satellite orbit around Hova.

"Do you comprehend, Slave?"

asked the Weapon.

"Sure. This thing ain't nothin' to run compared to a T-model Ford! Which way is it to Earth?"

"That I shall not tell you, Jacob, because I must leave the ship for a few hours and desire to find you here when I return. Consider and tell me: Will you be here?"

Jacob gazed at the broad, star-spangled viewplate that curved around his seat at the controls. There was, he reflected an awful lot of nothing out there for a man to get lost in.

"I'll be here," he promised.

"Very good. You must understand that these controls are constructed for manipulation by such limbs as your own and those of the Hovans. Thus, it is convenient for me to use you as a pilot instead of doing the drab, mechanical task with my ill-suited force-field manipulators. You will be wise to serve me well, Jacob."

Jacob nodded. "You got a point there."

"Operate the lock for me," the Weapon ordered.

Jacob did so and watched the colorful machine drift out of sight in the atmosphere below the cruiser.

Minutes ticked quietly by as Jacob gazed down at the purple planet and wondered why the Weapon had not chosen a trained Hovan pilot instead of him. Also,

he wondered how soon the Weapon would take him home to Earth.

A great swath of the purple planet began turning black. The black dulled to the gray shade of ashes as the swath grew longer. Over the surface of Hova, the blackening moved like some colossal paint brush. Dense clouds of smoke rolled upward to the high reaches of the atmosphere.

Jacob realized why the Weapon had not selected a Hovan pilot.

When all of Hova was a lifeless ball in a fog of ash, the Weapon returned.

"Ah, good Jacob!" it boomed jovially. "Let us be up and doing! Thirty-six planets remain to be visited before my current assignment is concluded!"

"Do all of them get—that?" asked Jacob, nodding toward the lifeless world below.

"Yes. I was instructed to render this solar system lifeless before I malfunctioned. Since then, the life of this system has spread, with my insane aid, to infest other systems. Of course, my task must now include all those new Hovan worlds."

"Now wait a minute!" said Jacob in terror. "I can't let you do that!"

"They are your enemies, Jacob," reminded the Weapon. "They meant to kill every human on Terra. Also, by your own

words, they are soulless animals who live in sinful adultery. Ha! It amuses me to reason with you, Slave Jacob!"

"Godamighty, forgive me!" prayed Jacob, in horrified defeat.

THIE Weapon seemed to know how to find the Hovan planets from the markings of the cruiser's star charts. Jacob could not read the charts and saw no hope of getting back to earth and Suzy and the kids without the Weapon's help. Dully, he went about the tasks the Weapon ordered him to do.

Several weeks passed as one world after another was left a smoking ruin.

Finally the job was done.

"Now, can I go home?" begged Jacob.

"To Terra? No, Slave. I still need a pilot."

"But if you take me home," Jacob continued desperately, "you can get a better pilot than me. I'm just a dirt farmer. There's all kinds of airplane pilots on Earth, youngsters without families who would give their right arms to fly this thing. I bet!"

"Ah?" The Weapon considered. "A willing slave is, of course, always desirable. On the other

hand, Terra is up in arms against the empire of Hova, not realizing it is dead. They would destroy this craft on sight, and I would be obliged to wait around until they could construct another for me. No, I have decided we will not go to Terra."

"But, damn it, where else is there to go?"

"In search of my masters of Zoz," replied the Weapon. "Naturally, I wish to return myself to their services as soon as possible."

"But they might be anywhere!"

"True," the Weapon agreed. "But even after a billion years, I know of several places in the Universe they may be near. Their great cleansing sweeps tend to circle and turn in a pattern established long in advance. Thus we will go to those places where they may now be engaged in their consecrated task of universal purification."

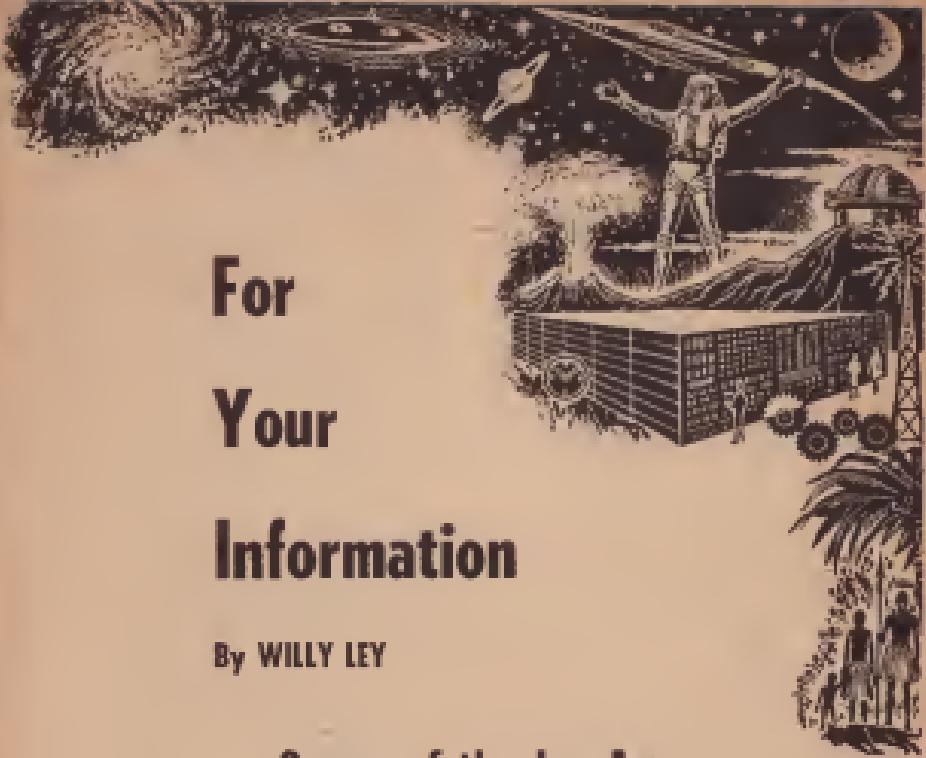
"But—"

"No more, Slave! We go!"

Out of the Milky Way, the cruiser hurtled at a speed which a sentient lightwave would find meaningless. On and on they journeyed in quest of the long-dead Zoz Horde.

They may still be going.

—HOWARD L. MYERS



For Your Information

By WILLY LEY

Cause of the Ice Age

THE proper season is now approaching for the discussion of a problem which brought several letters to my desk during the hot summer months. These letters asked questions about the Ice Age, specifically about the

cause of the big glaciations which, as we now know, once buried large portions of North America and most of northern Europe under thousands of feet of glacier ice.

There is hardly another prob-



lem in the realm of Natural History about which so many people have written so much with so little success as that of the causes of the Ice Age. Nor is there another problem for which so many "explanations" have been advanced. Some of them now make us shake our heads in wonderment.

In order to understand the story of these hypotheses, we have to remember that the first traces of the Ice Age were found in Europe.

For centuries, people could not help noticing that almost everywhere in northern Europe—north of the Alps and east of the Rhine—the flat sandy plain was strewn with boulders, small, middle-sized and large. Except for a few more or less local legends which accorded full credit to the devil or some demons, the boulders went unexplained until the Englishman Charles Lyell, the father of modern geology, advanced an ingenious explanation. This plain, he stated, had once been flooded by a shallow sea and the boulders had drifted southward from the North, carried in icebergs which gradually melted.

A number of geologists seem to have felt uneasily that this explanation did not cover all the observed facts. In Switzerland, for example, the glaciers had obviously been much larger at some

time in the past. And there were other indications which pointed to ice rather than water. But Lyell's shallow sea was the "easy way out" and the idea lingered on until the head of the Swedish Geological Society, Otto Martin Torell, finally disproved it in 1875.

Meanwhile, those who thought of ice rather than water tried to explain the ice. In fact, the term Ice Age had already been coined, interestingly enough in a poem, which, however, was written by a professional geologist, Schimper by name. At first things seemed simple enough—maybe the land connection between North and South America had been broken at the time when Europe had its large glaciers. With the isthmus of Panama open, the Gulf Stream would flow into the Pacific, hence Europe would freeze. The simple thought was ruined by reports from North America, saying in so many words that there was evidence for a North American glaciation, too.

IT looked as if the Earth as a whole had been cooler periodically and the logical consequence was a whole batch of theories with an astronomical basis. Obviously, if the whole planet had been subjected to a calamity, the cause had to be somewhere in space.

For a while, the reasoning of Dr. Eugène Dubois, the Dutch physician who had entered the Colonial Service in order to go to the East Indies, where he intended to discover the ancestor of Man (actually finding *Pithecanthropus erectus*), held full sway.

His reasoning was that all our energy comes from the Sun. The Sun is a star like other stars. Any look at the sky shows us that there are blue stars, presumably the hottest; yellow stars, like our own; and red stars. And any picture of our sun shows that it is beginning to age. There are the sun spots, harbingers of the red phase. At present they are relatively small in numbers, but as the Sun continues to age, they will increase in number. Presumably, they had been more numerous in the past, and that was the time of the Ice Age.

As most recent research has shown, he continued, the Ice Age had been a succession of four or maybe five glacier advances, separated by interglacial periods. For reasons still to be found, the Sun had gained strength again. But since we are obviously in just another interglacial period, the Sun will darken again and the ice will come back.

It was all very impressive and had a somber moral at the end. It was not Dr. Dubois' fault that stellar astronomy was in its in-

fancy and that nobody knew anything about atomic energy, for his book appeared in 1893. Now we know that the hot blue stars are not the youngest, but relatively old stars, and that the red stars, at least the Red Giants, haven't started contracting yet. And while we don't know the cause of the sun spots, we are absolutely certain that they are not a sign of old age.

What really discredited Dubois' theory, even before atomic energy was discovered, was the geological discovery that the so-called Ice Age had not been the first glaciation. There had been another one during the Permian period, followed by some 250 million years of the Triassic, Jurassic, Cretaceous and Tertiary periods, all of them warm enough to grow corals in the North Sea and palm trees in Labrador. And much further back, at the time when life had not even yet climbed out of the seas, there had been another glaciation. If the Sun had been "red" enough during the Permian period to permit a glaciation and had then "recovered" for a very long time, there was evidently something wrong with the whole concept.

NOT that some people did not try to save this concept by means of another erroneous astronomical theory which was

around at the time. The belief of at least some astronomers was that space was not completely empty. Modern astronomers say the same thing, but they have something different in mind. The idea then was that there was enough resistance in space to slow down the planets. At the same time it was also believed that the Sun renewed its energy by slowly contracting, aided by a constant bombardment of meteorites.

Taking both these ideas together, with a view of explaining the glaciations of the pre-Cambrian and the Permian periods as well as the recent one, the following picture was formed:

The Sun derived its energy from both contraction and meteoric bombardment. But that was not quite enough to balance the budget. Losing more energy than was received, the Sun slowly turned reddish and then red. On Earth, and presumably on the other planets, too, there was an Ice Age as a result. But just at that time, the innermost planet of all had contracted its orbit more and more because of the resistance of gases in space, and finally it grazed the solar surface. This, of course, was the end of that planet, but its comparatively large mass added so much energy to the Sun that it was restored to full yellow splendor.

Thrice in the past, the theory

said, the crash of the then innermost planet had saved the Sun and the other planets. Next time Mercury would be the planet coming unwillingly to the rescue. Then it would be Venus's turn, and after that Earth would fall into the Sun to end an Ice Age on Mars.

It was all very dramatic. It was also highly incorrect.

Now, of course, you cannot reason that the stove must be going out just because you feel less heat. It is also possible that you are farther away from the stove or else that there is a screen between you and the heater. In astronomical terms, bent upon explaining the Ice Age, the former theory meant that the orbit of the Earth might have changed. At present, the Earth's orbit is an almost perfect circle. What would happen if it were a more eccentric ellipse? According to Kepler's Second Law of Planetary Motion, the Earth, in a highly elliptical orbit, would move very fast when near the Sun and dawdle when far from the Sun. This would mean short, hot summers and long, cold winters. Hence a glaciation, for the hot summer would be too short to completely melt the ice which had accumulated during the long winter.

Just in case that any of this may remind some readers of Velikovsky, I want to make clear

that I am talking about ideas advanced prior to 1900. Evidently some of these old books provided him with "inspiration."

So this meant that the Earth had traveled in an eccentric orbit at least three times, in between returning to the circular one it has now. What had caused these changes? Well, the authors hesitated at that point and started hedging with statements like having to accept facts even if we cannot explain them. Or saying that all the laws of Nature are not yet known. Or suggesting passing stars.

THESE ideas, evolved mostly on the basis of a theory along these general lines first advanced by the Scotsman James Croll, received a severe setback for an entirely unexpected reason. A Dr. Schmick, by profession a high school teacher in Cologne, pointed out that a change in eccentricity of the orbit must necessarily influence the Earth's rotation—in other words, the length of the day.

The thought was in itself correct. When Earth is running in a more elliptical orbit, the tides caused by the Sun should increase in intensity and slow the rotation down. What would happen then? Obviously there would be less centrifugal force along the equator, hence the waters would

spread out more, in the direction of both poles.

Sir Charles Lyell had, on occasion, remarked that equatorial land—as distinct from equatorial seas—should improve the climate of the Earth as a whole. Equatorial land would absorb more of the solar heat, while equatorial water would simply evaporate, be carried to the poles and cause more snow and ice there. In short, Lyell had said that an Ice Age was more likely when the equator was very wet. But a wet equator went with a near-circular orbit, which is what we have now.

For quite some time, there was an extensive discussion about what a wet equator would do, the three main contributors to the fight being the American geologist Becker, the Norwegian botanist Axel Blytt, and the German professor Max Hildebrandt. In the course of the discussion, the original question about the eccentricity of the Earth's orbit was soon lost; it became primarily a question of whether a wet equator was enough cause in itself.

Mostly because of the reasonably wet equator of our day and the non-Ice Age climate, it was decided that there had to be an additional cause. Becker thought that the inclination of the Earth's axis had to undergo changes; Blytt and Hildebrandt were more interested in tall and large (and

hypothetical) mountains. The high evaporation rate would do good only if in the high north and far south there were large mountain chains on which the moisture could condense and form glaciers.

As can be seen, these ideas, although they started in the realm of astronomy, became more and more terrestrial as the debate went on. The shifts in the Earth's orbit quietly dropped out and were replaced by polar mountains or high plateaus.

This was watched with some glee by a considerable group of geologists, both amateur and professional, who had never dabbled with the Cosmos, but had stayed on the ground with their theories.

But the mail is heavy right now and I have to postpone examination of this second set of theories until next month, when the weather will be even more suitable for such discussion.

—WILLY LEY

ANY QUESTIONS?

(1) *When mass is created from energy, how long would it take the gravity of that new mass to act upon objects some distance away?*

(2) *What is it that makes homing pigeons home?*

Hartley M. Thompson
545 W. 112th St.
New York 22, N. Y.

If anybody could really answer the first question and prove that his answer is correct, he should be awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics for several years running. The question should be stated, "What is the propagation velocity of gravity?" and the answer is that we don't even know yet whether gravity has a propagation velocity.

As regards homing pigeons, most ornithologists previously agreed that the birds orient themselves by eyesight. This answer was rendered plausible by the observation that the bird takes comparatively short flights at first, which are gradually extended both in height and in distance.

Some twenty years ago, however, reports came in which seemed to indicate that homing pigeons get confused about direction when near a large radio station. It was then concluded that the birds may have a "magnetic organ" and that they orient themselves with reference to the Earth's magnetic field. If that were the case, a nearby radio station might well produce misleading signals in such an organ. But recently this has been disproved by the simple expedient of attaching tiny magnets to the pigeon's wings. In spite of the magnets, the

birds homed without the least confusion.

So eyesight seems to be the answer, after all.

Do any of the asteroids have satellites?

*Jerome Pierce
275 McMame Ave.*

Berkeley Heights, N. J.

Of the dozen or so largest asteroids which are comparatively easy to observe, it is definitely known that they do not have satellites. But it is quite possible that a number of the small asteroids which are below the limit of visibility of small and middle-sized telescopes revolve in pairs; i. e., that two small asteroids of about equal size revolve around each other in their course around the Sun. No such case is actually on record, but it is a possibility.

The continued reference to "no weight in space" baffles me. If your ship had attained a velocity away from the Earth faster than the Earth pulls you back, you can't have achieved weightlessness because the Earth still is pulling you back.

*Phil Davis
1751 So. Victor
Tulsa, Oklahoma*

It is true that the Earth still is pulling you back, but the

state of weightlessness (more properly called "zero-g condition") is not due to being outside a gravitational field of measurable intensity. The zero-g condition will result anywhere, even deep in a powerful gravitational field, provided the pull of gravity is not resisted. If you imagine a freely falling ship, you'll realize that the ship, the crew, and all the contents of the ship fall in the same direction with the same velocity. Hence a chair will not support a man, a floor will not support a chair, etc., etc., and everything will seem weightless.

How will an atomic-powered airplane operate?

J. O. Curtis

(no address given)

Nothing has been said officially about atomic-powered airplanes except that one is being designed. It is virtually certain, however, that the principle will be the same that is utilized for the atomic propulsion of a submarine. That principle is that you run an atomic pile hot enough to boil a "working liquid" which might be simply water, but could be something else, for example mercury. The vapor of the "working liquid" then drives a turbine, is condensed and then returned to the pile to be evaporated again.

The turbine could drive a propeller directly, or else drive a generator which produces current that is fed into the drive motors, similar to the-Diesel-electric drive of modern locomotives.

In short, we deal here with a kind of steam turbine, with an atomic pile replacing the old firebox. Quite apparently, the atomic-powered airplane will have to be large and, for this reason, is likely to be a flying boat. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that the airplane manufacturing firm in charge of the design work is known for this type of aircraft.

Why don't they use cartridges in big naval guns? It seems so cumbersome to load powder bags by hand.

James Brook
11 Cranberry St.
Brooklyn 2, N. Y.

If a big gun fires at a target four miles away, it obviously needs less powder than for firing at a target twenty miles away. Loading bags is a method of adjusting the powder charge.

It is not the cost of the gunpowder which is under consideration, but the life of the gun. If cartridges were used, they would be charged for maximum range and therefore exert maximum strain on the gun barrel

with every round, causing maximum wear. For hand weapons this is unimportant, but large-caliber guns are much less expendable.

A great many science fiction stories have spaceships going to other planets accelerating all the way. Since there is nothing in space to hinder a ship, couldn't it stop accelerating after escape velocity has been reached?

Peter Salus
1967 Andrews Ave.
The Bronx 53, N. Y.

The answer is yes, of course. The reason for the continuous acceleration used by many writers is that they want to reduce the duration of the trip as much as possible. The more than 200 days required for a trip to Mars or Venus, if the motors are cut as soon as escape velocity has been reached, are usually a dead interlude in the story. With continuous acceleration of 1 g, the trip would be cut to about two weeks. Fictional characters don't grow old in transit that way—but they would if they had to pay the fuel bill.

On a certain planet, the people have a saying: "It's not the humidity, it's the heat." Can you describe this planet and its people?

Edward Wellen
167 Centre Avenue
New Rochelle, N. Y.

This question came in in August when I was on vacation and was, therefore, unable to look up the galactic coordinates. It is obvious, however, that the inhabitants must be reptilian in nature, since reptiles have no sweat glands and therefore suffer heat strokes easily. On the other hand, no reptile ever felt an aversion to mud, so presumably humidity won't bother them. Although Dr. E. E. Smith did not record such a saying, it might be *Velantia* you have in mind. As regards transliteration of the original sounds, please query L. Sprague de Camp. That's his specialty.

How far from the Earth is the point where both the Earth and the Moon exert the same gravitational pull on a rocket?

M. M. Fried
144-16 Jewel Avenue
Kew Garden Hills, N. Y.

That point is about 90 per cent of the way to the Moon. The average center-to-center distance of the Earth and the Moon is 239,000 miles, so the "neutral point" would be, in round figures, 25,000 miles from the center of the Moon. Since the distance Earth-Moon is not always precisely the same,

the distance of the "point" shifts a little, too.

Wouldn't it be possible to measure the diameter of Pluto by occultation of a star?

John Westfall
507 Kenmore Ave.
Oakland 10, Calif.

Of course, that would be possible, but there are certain difficulties. Pluto is so far away from the Earth that it is what astronomers call a "difficult object." It does not show a disk except in the largest instruments. For the same reason, it is less likely to cover (or "ocult") a star than the large planets like Jupiter and Saturn or our own moon, which is not large, but near. The likelihood of a star occultation by Pluto has in all probability been checked and if there is one, astronomers will surely allot time on a big instrument for this purpose.

What happens if a venomous snake bites (a) a venomous snake of another kind and (b) one of its own kind?

Lucy Cores
Larchmont, N. Y.

They'll probably die or at least get very sick. Venomous snakes are not immune to their own poison.



the Leech

Illustrated by CONNELL

By PHILLIPS BARBEE

*A visitor should be fed, but
this one could eat you out of
house and home . . . literally!*

THE leech was waiting for food. For millenia it had been drifting across the vast emptiness of space. Without consciousness, it had spent the

countless centuries in the void between the stars. It was unaware when it finally reached a sun. Life-giving radiation flared around the hard, dry spore.

Gravitation tugged at it.

A planet claimed it, with other stellar debris, and the leech fell, still dead-seeming within its tough spore case.

One speck of dust among many, the winds blew it around the Earth, played with it, and let it fall.

On the ground, it began to stir. Nourishment soaked in, permeating the spore case. It grew—and fed.

FRANK CONNERS came up on the porch and coughed twice. "Say, pardon me, Professor," he said.

The long, pale man didn't stir from the sagging couch. His horn-rimmed glasses were perched on his forehead, and he was snoring very gently.

"I'm awful sorry to disturb you," Connors said, pushing back his battered felt hat. "I know it's your restin' week and all, but there's something damned funny in the ditch."

The pale man's left eyebrow twitched, but he showed no other sign of having heard.

Frank Connors coughed again, holding his spade in one purple-veined hand. "Didja hear me, Professor?"

"Of course I heard you," Micheals said in a muffled voice, his eyes still closed. "You found a pixie."

"A what?" Connors asked, squinting at Micheals.

"A little man in a green suit. Feed him milk, Connors."

"No, sir. I think it's a rock."

Micheals opened one eye and focused it in Connors' general direction.

"I'm awfully sorry about it," Connors said. Professor Micheals' resting week was a ten-year-old custom, and his only eccentricity. All winter Micheals taught anthropology, worked on half a dozen committees, dabbled in physics and chemistry, and still found time to write a book a year. When summer came, he was tired.

Arriving at his worked-out New York State farm, it was his invincible rule to do absolutely nothing for a week. He hired Frank Connors to cook for that week and generally make himself useful, while Professor Micheals slept.

During the second week, Micheals would wander around, look at the trees and fish. By the third week he would be getting a tan, reading, repairing the sheds and climbing mountains. At the end of four weeks, he could hardly wait to get back to the city.

But the resting week was sacred.

"I really wouldn't bother you for anything small," Connors said apologetically. "But that damned

rock melted two inches off my spade."

Micheals opened both eyes and sat up. Connors held out the spade. The rounded end was sheared cleanly off. Micheals swung himself off the couch and slipped his feet into battered moccasins.

"Let's see this wonder," he said.

THE object was lying in the ditch at the end of the front lawn, three feet from the main road. It was round, about the size of a truck tire, and solid throughout. It was about an inch thick, as far as he could tell, grayish black and intricately veined.

"Don't touch it," Connors warned.

"I'm not going to. Let me have your spade." Micheals took the spade and prodded the object experimentally. It was completely unyielding. He held the spade to the surface for a moment, then withdrew it. Another inch was gone.

Micheals frowned, and pushed his glasses tighter against his nose. He held the spade against the rock with one hand, the other held close to the surface. More of the spade disappeared.

"Doesn't seem to be generating heat," he said to Connors. "Did

you notice any the first time?"

Connors shook his head.

Micheals picked up a clod of dirt and tossed it on the object. The dirt dissolved quickly, leaving no trace on the gray-black surface. A large stone followed the dirt, and disappeared in the same way.

"Isn't that just about the damnedest thing you ever saw, Professor?" Connors asked.

"Yes," Micheals agreed, standing up again. "It just about is."

He hefted the spade and brought it down smartly on the object. When it hit, he almost dropped the spade. He had been gripping the handle rigidly, braced for a recoil. But the spade struck that unyielding surface and stayed. There was no perceptible give, but absolutely no recoil.

"Whatcha think it is?" Connors asked.

"It's no stone," Micheals said. He stepped back. "A leech drinks blood. This thing seems to be drinking dirt. And spades." He struck it a few more times, experimentally. The two men looked at each other. On the road, half a dozen Army trucks rolled past.

"I'm going to phone the college and ask a physics man about it."

Micheals said. "Or a biologist. I'd like to get rid of that thing before it spoils my lawn."

They walked back to the house.

EVERYTHING fed the leech. The wind added its modicum of kinetic energy, ruffling across the gray-black surface. Rain fell, and the force of each individual drop added to its store. The water was sucked in by the all-absorbing surface.

The sunlight above it was absorbed, and converted into mass for its body. Beneath it, the soil was consumed, dirt, stones and branches broken down by the leech's complex cells and changed into energy. Energy was converted back into mass, and the leech grew.

Slowly, the first flickers of consciousness began to return. Its first realization was of the impossible smallness of its body.

It grew.

When Micheals looked the next day, the leech was eight feet across, sticking out into the road and up the side of the lawn. The following day it was almost eighteen feet in diameter, shaped to fit the contour of the ditch, and covering most of the road. That day the sheriff drove up in his model A, followed by half the town.

"Is that your leech thing, Professor Micheals?" Sheriff Flynn asked.

"That's it," Micheals said. He had spent the past days looking unsuccessfully for an acid that would dissolve the leech.

"We gotta get it out of the road," Flynn said, walking truculently up to the leech. "Something like this, you can't let it block the road, Professor. The Army's gotta use this road."

"I'm terribly sorry," Micheals said with a straight face. "Go right ahead, Sheriff. But be careful. It's hot." The leech wasn't hot, but it seemed the simplest explanation under the circumstances.

Micheals watched with interest as the sheriff tried to shove a crowbar under it. He smiled to himself when it was removed with half a foot of its length gone.

The sheriff wasn't so easily discouraged. He had come prepared for a stubborn piece of rock. He went to the rumble seat of his car and took out a blowtorch and a sledgehammer, ignited the torch and focused it on one edge of the leech.

After five minutes, there was no change. The gray didn't turn red or even seem to heat up. Sheriff Flynn continued to bake it for fifteen minutes, then called to one of the men.

"Hit that spot with the sledge, Jerry."

Jerry picked up the sledgehammer, motioned the sheriff

back, and swung it over his head. He let out a howl as the hammer struck unyieldingly. There wasn't a fraction of recoil.

In the distance they heard the roar of an Army convoy.

"Now we'll get some action," Flynn said.

MICHEALS wasn't so sure. He walked around the periphery of the leech, asking himself what kind of substance would react that way. The answer was easy—no substance. No known substance.

The driver in the lead jeep held up his hand, and the long convoy ground to a halt. A hard, efficient-looking officer stepped out of the jeep. From the star on either shoulder, Micheals knew he was a brigadier general.

"You can't block this road," the general said. He was a tall, spare man in suntans, with a sunburned face and cold eyes. "Please clear that thing away."

"We can't move it," Micheals said. He told the general what had happened in the past few days.

"It must be moved," the general said. "This convoy must go through." He walked closer and looked at the leech. "You say it can't be jacked up by a crowbar? A torch won't burn it?"

"That's right," Micheals said, smiling faintly.

"Driver," the general said over his shoulder. "Ride over it."

Micheals started to protest, but stopped himself. The military mind would have to find out in its own way.

The driver put his jeep in gear and shot forward, jumping the leech's four-inch edge. The jeep got to the center of the leech and stopped.

"I didn't tell you to stop!" the general bellowed.

"I didn't, sir!" the driver protested.

The jeep had been yanked to a stop and had stalled. The driver started it again, shifted to four-wheel drive, and tried to ram forward. The jeep was fixed immovably, as though set in concrete.

"Pardon me," Micheals said. "If you look, you can see that the tires are melting down."

The general stared, his hand creeping automatically toward his pistol belt. Then he shouted, "Jump, driver! Don't touch that gray stuff."

White-faced, the driver climbed to the hood of his jeep, looked around him, and jumped clear.

There was complete silence as everyone watched the jeep. First its tires melted down, and then the rims. The body, resting on the gray surface, melted, too.

The aerial was the last to go.

The general began to swear softly under his breath. He turned

to the driver. "Go back and have some men bring up hand grenades and dynamite."

The driver ran back to the convoy.

"I don't know what you've got here," the general said. "But it's not going to stop a U.S. Army convoy."

Micheals wasn't so sure.

THE leech was nearly awake now, and its body was calling for more and more food. It dissolved the soil under it at a furious rate, filling it in with its own body, flowing outward.

A large object landed on it, and that became food also. Then suddenly—

A burst of energy against its surface, and then another, and another. It consumed them gratefully, converting them into mass. Little metal pellets struck it, and their kinetic energy was absorbed, their mass converted. More explosions took place, helping to fill the starving cells.

It began to sense things—controlled combustion around it, vibrations of wind, mass movements.

There was another, greater explosion, a taste of *real* food! Greedily it ate, growing faster. It waited anxiously for more explosions, while its cells screamed for food.

But no more came. It contin-

ued to feed on the soil and on the Sun's energy. Night came, noticeable for its lesser energy possibilities, and then more days and nights. Vibrating objects continued to move around it.

It ate and grew and flowed.

MICHAELS stood on a little hill, watching the dissolution of his house. The leech was several hundred yards across now, lapping at his front porch.

Good-by, home, Micheals thought, remembering the ten summers he had spent there.

The porch collapsed into the body of the leech. Bit by bit, the house crumpled.

The leech looked like a field of lava now, a blasted spot on the green Earth.

"Pardon me, sir," a soldier said, coming up behind him. "General O'Donnell would like to see you."

"Right," Micheals said, and took his last look at the house.

He followed the soldier through the barbed wire that had been set up in a half-mile circle around the leech. A company of soldiers was on guard around it, keeping back the reporters and the hundreds of curious people who had flocked to the scene. Micheals wondered why he was still allowed inside. Probably, he decided, because most of this was taking place on his land.

The soldier brought him to a

tent. Micheals stooped and went in. General O'Donnell, still in suntans, was seated at a small desk. He motioned Micheals to a chair.

"I've been put in charge of getting rid of this leech," he said to Micheals.

Micheals nodded, not commenting on the advisability of giving a soldier a scientist's job.

"You're a professor, aren't you?"

"Yes. Anthropology."

"Good. Smoke?" The general lighted Micheals' cigarette. "I'd like you to stay around here in an advisory capacity. You were one of the first to see this leech. I'd appreciate your observations on—" he smiled—"the enemy."

"I'd be glad to," Micheals said. "However, I think this is more in the line of a physicist or a bio-chemist."

"I don't want this place cluttered with scientists," General O'Donnell said, frowning at the tip of his cigarette. "Don't get me wrong. I have the greatest appreciation for science. I am, if I do say so, a scientific soldier. I'm always interested in the latest weapons. You can't fight any kind of a war any more without science."

O'DONNELL'S sunburned face grew firm. "But I can't have a team of longhairs poking

around this thing for the next month, holding me up. My job is to destroy it, by any means in my power, and at once. I am going to do just that."

"I don't think you'll find it that easy," Micheals said.

"That's what I want you for," O'Donnell said. "Tell me why and I'll figure out a way of doing it."

"Well, as far as I can figure out, the leech is an organic mass-energy converter, and a frighteningly efficient one. I would guess that it has a double cycle. First, it converts mass into energy, then back into mass for its body. Second, energy is converted directly into the body mass. How this takes place, I do not know. The leech is not protoplasmic. It may not even be cellular—"

"So we need something big against it," O'Donnell interrupted. "Well, that's all right. I've got some big stuff here."

"I don't think you understand me," Micheals said. "Perhaps I'm not phrasing this very well. The leech eats energy. It can consume the strength of any energy weapon you use against it."

"What happens," O'Donnell asked, "if it keeps on eating?"

"I have no idea what its growth-limits are," Micheals said. "Its growth may be limited only by its food source."

"You mean it could continue

to grow probably forever?"

"It could possibly grow as long as it had something to feed on."

"This is really a challenge," O'Donnell said. "That leech can't be totally impervious to force."

"It seems to be. I suggest you get some physicists in here. Some biologists also. Have them figure out a way of nullifying it."

The general put out his cigarette. "Professor, I cannot wait while scientists wrangle. There is an axiom of mine which I am going to tell you." He paused impressively. "Nothing is impervious to force. Muster enough force and anything will give. Anything."

"Professor," the general continued, in a friendlier tone, "you shouldn't sell short the science you represent. We have, massed under North Hill, the greatest accumulation of energy and radioactive weapons ever assembled in one spot. Do you think your leech can stand the full force of them?"

"I suppose it's possible to overload the thing," Micheals said doubtfully. He realized now why the general wanted him around. He supplied the trappings of science, without the authority to override O'Donnell.

"Come with me," General O'Donnell said cheerfully, getting up and holding back a flap of the tent. "We're going to crack that leech in half."

AFTER a long wait, rich food started to come again, piped into one side of it. First there was only a little, and then more and more. Radiations, vibrations, explosions, solids, liquids — an amazing variety of edibles. It accepted them all. But the food was coming too slowly for the starving cells, for new cells were constantly adding their demands to the rest.

The ever-hungry body screamed for more food, faster!

Now that it had reached a fairly efficient size, it was fully awake. It puzzled over the energy-impressions around it, locating the source of the new food massed in one spot.

Effortlessly it pushed itself into the air, flew a little way and dropped on the food. Its super-efficient cells eagerly gulped the rich radioactive substances. But it did not ignore the lesser potentials of metal and clumps of carbohydrates.

THE damned fools," General O'Donnell said. "Why did they have to panic? You'd think they'd never been trained." He paced the ground outside his tent, now in a new location three miles back.

The leech had grown to two miles in diameter. Three farming communities had been evacuated.

Micheals, standing beside the

general, was still stupefied by the memory. The leech had accepted the massed power of the weapons for a while, and then its entire bulk had lifted in the air. The Sun had been blotted out as it flew leisurely over North Hill, and dropped. There should have been time for evacuation, but the frightened soldiers had been blind with fear.

Sixty-seven men were lost in Operation Leech, and General O'Donnell asked permission to use atomic bombs. Washington sent a group of scientists to investigate the situation.

"Haven't those experts decided yet?" O'Donnell asked, halting angrily in front of the tent. "They've been talking long enough."

"It's a hard decision," Micheals said. Since he wasn't an official member of the investigating team, he had given his information and left. "The physicists consider it a biological matter, and the biologists seem to think the chemists should have the answer. No one's an expert on this, because it's never happened before. We just don't have the data."

"It's a military problem," O'Donnell said harshly. "I'm not interested in what the thing is—I want to know what can destroy it. They'd better give me permission to use the bomb."

Micheals had made his own calculations on that. It was impossible to say for sure, but taking a flying guess at the leech's mass-energy absorption rate, figuring in its size and apparent capacity for growth, an atomic bomb might overload it—if used soon enough.

He estimated three days as the limit of usefulness. The leech was growing at a geometric rate. It could cover the United States in a few months.

"For a week I've been asking permission to use the bomb," O'Donnell grumbled. "And I'll get it, but not until after those jackasses end their damned talking." He stopped pacing and turned to Micheals. "I am going to destroy the leech. I am going to smash it, if that's the last thing I do. It's more than a matter of security now. It's personal pride."

That attitude might make great generals, Micheals thought, but it wasn't the way to consider this problem. It was anthropomorphic of O'Donnell to see the leech as an enemy. Even the identification, "leech," was a humanizing factor. O'Donnell was dealing with it as he would any physical obstacle, as though the leech were the simple equivalent of a large army.

But the leech was not human, not even of this planet, perhaps. It should be dealt with in its own terms.

"Here come the bright boys now," O'Donnell said.

FROM a nearby tent a group of weary men emerged, led by Allenson, a government biologist.

"Well," the general asked, "have you figured out what it is?"

"Just a minute, I'll hack off a sample," Allenson said, glaring through red-tinted eyes.

"Have you figured out some scientific way of killing it?"

"Oh, that wasn't too difficult," Moriarty, an atomic physicist, said wryly. "Wrap it in a perfect vacuum. That'll do the trick. Or blow it off the Earth with anti-gravity."

"But failing that," Allenson said, "we suggest you use your atomic bombs, and use them fast."

"Is that the opinion of your entire group?" O'Donnell asked, his eyes glittering.

"Yes."

The general hurried away. Micheals joined the scientists.

"He should have called us in at the very first," Allenson complained. "There's no time to consider anything but force now."

"Have you come to any conclusions about the nature of the leech?" Micheals asked.

"Only general ones," Moriarty said, "and they're about the same as yours. The leech is probably extraterrestrial in origin. It seems

to have been in a spore-stage until it landed on Earth." He paused to light a pipe. "Incidentally, we should be damned glad it didn't drop in an ocean. We'd have had the Earth eaten out from under us before we knew what we were looking for."

They walked in silence for a few minutes.

"As you mentioned, it's a perfect converter—it can transform mass into energy, and any energy into mass," Moriarty grinned. "Naturally that's impossible and I have figures to prove it."

"I'm going to get a drink," Allenson said. "Anyone coming?"

"Best idea of the week," Micheals said. "I wonder how long it'll take O'Donnell to get permission to use the bomb."

"If I know politics," Moriarty said, "too long."

THE findings of the government scientists were checked by other government scientists. That took a few days. Then Washington wanted to know if there wasn't some alternative to exploding an atomic bomb in the middle of New York State. It took a little time to convince them of the necessity. After that, people had to be evacuated, which took more time.

Then orders were made out, and five atomic bombs were checked out of a cache. A patrol

rocket was assigned, given orders, and put under General O'Donnell's command. This took a day more.

Finally, the stubby scout rocket was winging its way over New York. From the air, the grayish-black spot was easy to find. Like a festered wound, it stretched between Lake Placid and Elizabethtown, covering Keene and Keene Valley, and lapping at the edges of Jay.

The first bomb was released.

IT had been a long wait after the first rich food. The greater radiation of day was followed by the lesser energy of night many times, as the leech ate away the Earth beneath it, absorbed the air around it, and grew. Then one day—

An amazing burst of energy!

Everything was food for the leech, but there was always the possibility of choking. The energy poured over it, drenched it, battered it, and the leech grew frantically, trying to contain the titanic dose. Still small, it quickly reached its overload limit. The strained cells, filled to satiation, were given more and more food. The strangling body built new cells at lightning speed. And—

It held. The energy was controlled, stimulating further growth. More cells took over the load, sucking in the food.

The next doses were wonderfully palatable, easily handled. The leech overflowed its bounds, growing, eating, and growing.

That was a taste of real food! The leech was as near ecstasy as it had ever been. It waited hopefully for more, but no more came.

It went back to feeding on the Earth. The energy, used to produce more cells, was soon dissipated. Soon it was hungry again.

It would always be hungry.

O'DONNELL retreated with his demoralized men. They camped ten miles from the leech's southern edge, in the evacuated town of Schroon Lake. The leech was over sixty miles in diameter now and still growing fast. It lay sprawled over the Adirondack Mountains, completely blanketing everything from Saranac Lake to Port Henry, with one edge of it over Westport, in Lake Champlain.

"Everyone within two hundred miles of the leech was evacuated.

General O'Donnell was given permission to use hydrogen bombs, contingent on the approval of his scientists.

"What have the bright boys decided?" O'Donnell wanted to know.

He and Micheals were in the living room of an evacuated Schroon Lake house. O'Donnell

had made it his new command post.

"Why are they hedging?" O'Donnell demanded impatiently. "The leech has to be blown up quick. What are they fooling around for?"

"They're afraid of a chain reaction," Micheals told him. "A concentration of hydrogen bombs might set one up in the Earth's crust or in the atmosphere. It might do any of half a dozen things."

"Perhaps they'd like me to order a bayonet attack," O'Donnell said contemptuously.

Micheals sighed and sat down in an armchair. He was convinced that the whole method was wrong. The government scientists were being rushed into a single line of inquiry. The pressure on them was so great that they didn't have a chance to consider any other approach but force—and the leech thrived on that.

Micheals was certain that there were times when fighting fire with fire was not applicable.

Fire. Loki, god of fire. And of trickery. No, there was no answer there. But Micheals' mind was in mythology now, retreating from the unbearable present.

Allenson came in, followed by six other men.

"Well," Allenson said, "there's a damned good chance of splitting the Earth wide open if you

use the number of bombs our figures show you need."

"You have to take chances in war," O'Donnell replied bluntly. "Shall I go ahead?"

Micheals saw, suddenly, that O'Donnell didn't care if he did crack the Earth. The red-faced general only knew that he was going to set off the greatest explosion ever produced by the hand of Man.

"Not so fast," Allenson said. "I'll let the others speak for themselves."

The general contained himself with difficulty. "Remember," he said, "according to your own figures, the leech is growing at the rate of twenty feet an hour."

"And speeding up," Allenson added. "But this isn't a decision to be made in haste."

Micheals found his mind wandering again, to the lightning bolts of Zeus. That was what they needed. Or the strength of Hercules.

Or—

He sat up suddenly. "Gentlemen, I believe I can offer you a possible alternative, although it's a very dim one."

They stared at him.

"Have you ever heard of Antaeus?" he asked.

THE more the leech ate, the faster it grew and the hungrier it became. Although its

birth was forgotten, it did remember a long way back. It had eaten a planet in that ancient past. Grown tremendous, ravenous, it had made the journey to a nearby star and eaten that, replenishing the cells converted into energy for the trip. But then there was no more food, and the next star was an enormous distance away.

It set out on the journey, but long before it reached the food, its energy ran out. Mass, converted back to energy to make the trip, was used up. It shrank.

Finally, all the energy was gone. It was a spore, drifting aimlessly, lifelessly, in space.

That was the first time. Or was it? It thought it could remember back to a distant, misty time when the Universe was evenly covered with stars. It had eaten through them, cutting away whole sections, growing, swelling. And the stars had swung off in terror, forming galaxies and constellations.

Or was that a dream?

Methodically, it fed on the Earth, wondering where the rich food was. And then it was back again, but this time above the leech.

It waited, but the tantalizing food remained out of reach. It was able to sense how rich and pure the food was.

Why didn't it fall?

For a long time the leech waited, but the food stayed out of reach. At last, it lifted and followed.

The food retreated, up, up from the surface of the planet. The leech went after as quickly as its bulk would allow.

The rich food fled out, into space, and the leech followed. Beyond, it could sense an even richer source.

The hot, wonderful food of a sun!

O'DONNELL served champagne for the scientists in the control room. Official dinners would follow, but this was the victory celebration.

"A toast," the general said, standing. The men raised their glasses. The only man not drinking was a lieutenant, sitting in front of the control board that guided the drone spaceship.

"To Micheals, for thinking of —what was it again, Micheals?"

"Antaeus." Micheals had been drinking champagne steadily, but he didn't feel elated. Antaeus, born of Ge, the Earth, and Poseidon, the Sea. The invincible wrestler. Each time Hercules threw him to the ground, he arose refreshed.

Until Hercules held him in the air.

Moriarty was muttering to himself, figuring with slide rule,

pencil and paper. Allenson was drinking, but he didn't look too happy about it.

"Come on, you birds of evil omen," O'Donnell said, pouring more champagne. "Figure it out later. Right now, drink." He turned to the operator. "How's it going?"

Micheals' analogy had been applied to a spaceship. The ship, operated by remote control, was filled with pure radioactives. It hovered over the leech until, rising to the bait, it had followed. Antaeus had left his mother, the Earth, and was losing his strength in the air. The operator was allowing the spaceship to run fast enough to keep out of the leech's grasp, but close enough to keep it coming.

The spaceship and the leech were on a collision course with the Sun.

"Fine, sir," the operator said. "It's inside the orbit of Mercury now."

"Men," the general said, "I swore to destroy that thing. This isn't exactly the way I wanted to do it. I figured on a more personal way. But the important thing is the destruction. You will all witness it. Destruction is at times a sacred mission. This is such a time. Men, I feel wonderful."

"Turn the spaceship!" It was Moriarty who had spoken. His

face was white. "Turn the damned thing!"

He shoved his figures at them.

They were easy to read. The growth-rate of the leech. The energy-consumption rate, estimated. Its speed in space, a constant. The energy it would receive from the Sun as it approached, an exponential curve. Its energy-absorption rate, figured in terms of growth, expressed as a hyped-up discontinuous progression.

The result—

"It'll consume the Sun," Moriarty said, very quietly.

The control room turned into a bedlam. Six of them tried to explain it to O'Donnell at the same time. Then Moriarty tried, and finally Allenson.

"Its rate of growth is so great and its speed so slow—and it will get so much energy—that the leech will be able to consume the Sun by the time it gets there. Or, at least, to live off it until it can consume it."

O'Donnell didn't bother to understand. He turned to the operator.

"Turn it," he said.

They all hovered over the radar screen, waiting.

THE food turned out of the leech's path and streaked away. Ahead was a tremendous source, but still a long way off.

The leech hesitated.

Its cells, recklessly expending energy, shouted for a decision. The food slowed, tantalizingly near.

The closer source or the greater?

The leech's body wanted food now.

It started after it, away from the Sun.

The Sun would come next.

PULL it out at right angles to the plane of the Solar System," Allenson said.

The operator touched the controls. On the radar screen, they saw a blob pursuing a dot. It had turned.

Relief washed over them. It had been close!

"In what portion of the sky would the leech be?" O'Donnell asked, his face expressionless.

"Come outside; I believe I can show you," an astronomer said. They walked to the door. "Somewhere in that section," the astronomer said, pointing.

"Fine. All right, Soldier," O'Donnell told the operator. "Carry out your orders."

The scientists gasped in unison. The operator manipulated the controls and the blob began to overtake* the dot. Micheals started across the room.

"Stop," the general said, and his strong, commanding voice

stopped Micheals. "I know what I'm doing. I had that ship especially built."

The blot overtook the dot on the radar screen.

"I told you this was a personal matter," O'Donnell said. "I swore to destroy that leech. We can never have any security while it lives." He smiled. "Shall we look at the sky?"

The general strolled to the door, followed by the scientists.

"Push the button, Soldier!"

The operator did. For a moment, nothing happened. Then the sky lit up!

A bright star hung in space. Its brilliance filled the night, grew, and started to fade.

"What did you do?" Micheals gasped.

"That rocket was built around a hydrogen bomb," O'Donnell said, his strong face triumphant. "I set it off at the contact moment." He called to the operator again. "Is there anything showing on the radar?"

"Not a speck, sir."

"Men," the general said, "I have met the enemy and he is mine. Let's have some more champagne."

But Micheals found that he was suddenly ill.

IT had been shrinking from the expenditure of energy, when the great explosion came. No

thought of containing it. The leech's cells held for the barest fraction of a second, and then spontaneously overloaded.

The leech was smashed, broken up, destroyed. It was split into a thousand particles, and the particles were split a million times more.

The particles were thrown out on the wave front of the explosion, and they split further, spontaneously.

Into spores.

The spores closed into dry, hard, seemingly lifeless specks of dust, billions of them, scattered, drifting. Unconscious, they floated in the emptiness of space.

Billions of them, waiting to be fed.

—PHILLIPS BARBEE

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5 STAR

SHELF

THE HEADS OF CERBERUS
by Francis Stevens. Polaris Press,
Reading, Pa., 1932. 190 pages,
\$3.00

AGAIN, as was the case last month, our best book is a "classic." This handsomely printed limited edition, first in what is to be known as the Polaris Fantasy Library, and available from the publisher only and not through bookstores, presents perhaps the first science fantasy to use the alternate time-track, or parallel worlds, idea. It was first published in 1919 in an early Street & Smith pulp.

Even more interesting is the

fact that "Francis Stevens" was actually a woman writer by the name of Gertrude Bennett who was born in 1884 and who literally disappeared in 1939. She took up writing to support herself and her infant daughter after her husband had been drowned in a tropical storm.

Despite its age and its amateur origins, *The Heads of Cerberus* is still readable and remarkably pointed. The book one can most closely compare it to is Fredric Brown's *What Mad Universe*. It tells of an alternate-world Philadelphia, reached by a handful of this-world people through some semi-black-magic nonsense that is

no more unscientific than a time machine.

This Philadelphia is one in which the political corrupters of the 1900s have become ruthless autocrats, ruling through phony "civic service" competitions which result in a cynically brutal enslavement of the people. The name of William Penn has become, under the organizational label of "Penn Service," the very fountainhead of cruel, dictatorial, viciously depraved government.

Despite a good deal of pseudo-mystical mumbo-jumbo, this is definitely a classic worth preserving—and, unlike many classics, also fun to read.

THE CREATION OF THE UNIVERSE by George Gamow. Viking Press, New York, 1952. 160 pages, 11 plates and 40 diagrams, \$3.75

IN this book Professor Gamow has brought together many of the current theories on the origins of the universe, our galaxy, and our sun and planets. He has woven from them a fascinating picture of one of the several possible ways whereby primordial matter-energy could have been transformed into the visible and invisible universe as we know and deduce it. It is science fiction of the highest order; science fiction based on sound science, on

logical deductions from scientific facts, and on some almost poetic extra-scientific—not non-scientific—assumptions.

Essentially Professor Gamow is a relativist. He believes, also, in a cosmic beginning as opposed to the steady-state universe that Fred Hoyle and others suggest. To Gamow, the expanding universe is a logical deduction from available evidence. Most of the way through the book, one fears that the author has pulled the Lucretian boomer: "From unity to infinity;" but in the very last section he postulates "the cornucopia open at both ends," and is saved from the great philosophical blunder.

Many people today are looking for certitudes that science cannot offer; Gamow makes no compromisers for these folk. His is a strictly material universe, and—despite many unprovable assumptions—a universe that is basically understandable. It has very little room for the mystic or the spiritual.

However, the author does accept certain theories, such as the idea that the Moon was torn out of the Pacific basin after the actual formation of the Earth, that are far from accepted even by the more liberal cosmogonists.

In other words, this volume is not the Compleat Answer. But within its limitations, it is a lucid,

lively and literate popularization of an ever-exciting subject—Where We Came from and Are Going.

EIDOLON by J. David Stern. Julian Messner, Inc., New York, 1952. 246 pages, \$3.00

THE HAPLOIDS by Jerry Sohl. Rinehart & Co., New York, 1952. 248 pages, \$2.50

WE are confronted with two widely differing novels which have one curious new scientific gimmick in common. The gimmick is parthenogenesis, or the creation by women alone of haploid, or half-chromosomed, people without the aid of males. Perhaps the idea itself, though scientifically sound as regards certain one-celled creatures, is poor when it comes to humans; in any event, it has produced two poor books.

Of the two, I prefer Sohl's, for it is at least unpretentious. It tells of a tribe of horrid haploid females who set out to eliminate men by means of a ray that attacks the Y chromosomes found only in the male sex and bumps off their owners.

There's the usual mad scientist (female, for a change), the cut-from-cardboard heroine who has been footed into thinking that she's haploid whereas (of course)

she really has all her genetic marbles and can reproduce her kind, and the reporter-hero, Model 124C41+ from the stock catalog. The book may amuse you for an hour or so. It did me, and maybe that's enough.

Eidolon, on the other hand, by the ex-publisher of the *New York Post* and the *Philadelphia Record*, is anything but entertaining. The story of a lone haploid superman, it is one of the most interminable bores I have ever tried to burrow through.

One-twentieth "science" "fiction," and nineteen-twentieths verbose promotion of its author's sick conglomeration of ideas for saving the world, defeating Communism, bringing science and religion together, and elevating the masses, the book ends up by infuriating the reader so thoroughly that he completely loses the values of its "elevating ideas" in the wallow of its forever unwinding declamations.

The "science spiked by suspense" referred to on the jacket is—believe it or not—a solemn-faced replica of the original *Virgin Birth!* The hero's mother, in a sublime effort to reconcile the facts of science and the mysteries of religion, retires to an attic for two weeks of contemplation and comes down pregnant. She nuff, it's our haploid hero, and this proves to everyone's sat-

infaction the mastery of Mind over Matter and the invincible superiority of superstition over science.

The book is absolutely sincere. Somehow that makes it all the worse.

Don't fail to miss it.

SHIP OF DESTINY by Henry J. Slater. Thomas Y. Crowell Co., New York, 1951. 187 pages, \$2.75

THIS novel is a pretty fair example of the current output of non-professional British science fiction, of which there is a surprising lot.

It has a reasonably real group of characters—engaged in total implausible actions in a setting that has practically no science fiction validity.

It is not badly written, but is nevertheless almost endlessly repetitive.

It has some imagination, yet deals inadequately with a very ancient theme much better handled by such earlier Britons as Wright and Shiel—the catastrophic subsidence of all the Earth's land masses and the sur-

vival of a small group of people, mainly British, to "carry on" on the newly risen continents.

Shades of Deluge and *The Purple Cloud?* Very much so.

The action takes place on a luxury liner, one of two vessels that, as far as can be ascertained, are the only objects other than water that remained on the surface of the Earth after the Cataclysm.

What drama there is (which is slight indeed) is whipped up over the attempts at adjustment and reorganization of the people remaining. The reorganization is handled in a typically British-ship's-officers' fashion—"the manly thing," "do what's decent," "sisters under the skin," and so on.

A second ship is dragged in for suspense, but succeeds in adding only a pretty fair description of a sinking.

There is no science in the book, and precious little acceptable fiction.

A pretty bad month.

Thank heaven for Stevens and Gamow!

—CROFF CONKLIN



Cost of Living

*If easy payment plans were
to be really efficient, patrons'
lifetimes had to be extended!*

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

CARRIN decided that he could trace his present mood to Miller's suicide last week. But the knowledge didn't help him get rid of the vague, formless fear in the back of his mind. It was foolish. Miller's suicide didn't concern him.

But why had that fat, jovial man killed himself? Miller had

had everything to live for—wife, kids, good job, and all the marvelous luxuries of the age. Why had he done it?

"Good morning, dear," Carrin's wife said as he sat down at the breakfast table.

"Morning, honey. Morning, Billy."

His son grunted something.

Illustrated by EMSH

You just couldn't tell about people, Carrin decided, and dialed his breakfast. The meal was gracefully prepared and served by the new Avignon Electric Auto-cook.

His mood persisted, annoyingly enough since Carrin wanted to be in top form this morning. It was his day off, and the Avignon Electric finance man was coming. This was an important day.

He walked to the door with his son.

"Have a good day, Billy."

His son nodded, shifted his books and started to school without answering. Carrin wondered if something was bothering him, too. He hoped not. One worrier in the family was plenty.

"See you later, honey." He kissed his wife as she left to go shopping.

At any rate, he thought, watching her go down the walk, at least she's happy. He wondered how much she'd spend at the A. E. store.

Checking his watch, he found that he had half an hour before the A. E. finance man was due. The best way to get rid of a bad mood was to drown it, he told himself, and headed for the shower.

THE shower room was a glittering plastic wonder, and the sheer luxury of it eased Carrin's

mind. He threw his clothes into the A. E. automatic Kleen-presser, and adjusted the shower spray to a notch above "brisk." The five-degrees-above-skin-temperature water beat against his thin white body. Delightful! And then a relaxing rub-dry in the A. E. Auto-towel.

Wonderful, he thought, as the towel stretched and kneaded his stringy muscles. And it should be wonderful, he reminded himself. The A. E. Auto-towel with shaving attachments had cost three hundred and thirteen dollars, plus tax.

But worth every penny of it, he decided, as the A. E. shaver came out of a corner and whisked off his rudimentary stubble. After all, what good was life if you couldn't enjoy the luxuries?

His skin tingled when he switched off the Auto-towel. He should have been feeling wonderful, but he wasn't. Miller's suicide kept nagging at his mind, destroying the peace of his day off.

Was there anything else bothering him? Certainly there was nothing wrong with the house. His papers were in order for the finance man.

"Have I forgotten something?" he asked out loud.

"The Avignon Electric finance man will be here in fifteen minutes," his A. E. bathroom Wall-

reminder whispered.

"I know that. Is there anything else?"

The Wall-reminder recited off its memorized data — a vast amount of minutiae about watering the lawn, having the Jet-lash checked, buying lamb chops for Monday, and the like. Things he still hadn't found time for.

"All right, that's enough." He allowed the A. E. Auto-dresser to dress him, skillfully draping a new selection of fabrics over his bony frame. A whiff of fashionable masculine perfume finished him and he went into the living room, threading his way between the appliances that lined the walls.

A quick inspection of the dials on the wall assured him that the house was in order. The breakfast dishes had been sanitized and stacked, the house had been cleaned, dusted, polished, his wife's garments had been hung up, his son's model rocket ships had been put back in the closet.

Stop worrying, you hypochondriac, he told himself angrily.

The door announced, "Mr. Pathis from Avignon Finance is here."

Carrin started to tell the door to open, when he noticed the Automatic Bartender.

Good God, why hadn't he thought of it!

The Automatic Bartender was

manufactured by Castile Motors. He had bought it in a weak moment. A. E. wouldn't think very highly of that, since they sold their own brand.

HE wheeled the bartender into the kitchen, and told the door to open.

"A very good day to you, sir," Mr. Pathis said.

Pathis was a tall, imposing man, dressed in a conservative tweed drape. His eyes had the crinkled corners of a man who laughs frequently. He beamed broadly and shook Carrin's hand, looking around the crowded living room.

"A beautiful place you have here, sir. Beautiful! As a matter of fact, I don't think I'll be overstepping the company's code to inform you that yours is the nicest interior in this section."

Carrin felt a sudden glow of pride at that, thinking of the rows of identical houses, on this block and the next, and the one after that.

"Now, then, is everything functioning properly?" Mr. Pathis asked, setting his briefcase on a chair. "Everything in order?"

"Oh, yes," Carrin said enthusiastically. "Avignon Electric never goes out of whack."

"The phone all right? Changes records for the full seventeen hours?"

"It certainly does," Carrin said. He hadn't had a chance to try out the phone, but it was a beautiful piece of furniture.

"The Solido-projector all right? Enjoying the programs?"

"Absolutely perfect reception." He had watched a program just last month, and it had been startlingly lifelike.

"How about the kitchen? Auto-cook in order? Recipe-master still knocking 'em out?"

"Marvelous stuff. Simply marvelous."

Mr. Pathis went on to inquire about his refrigerator, his vacuum cleaner, his car, his helicopter, his subterranean swimming pool, and the hundreds of other items Carrin had bought from Avignon Electric.

"Everything is swell," Carrin said, a trifle untruthfully since he hadn't unpacked every item yet. "Just wonderful."

"I'm so glad," Mr. Pathis said, leaning back with a sigh of relief. "You have no idea how hard we try to satisfy our customers. If a product isn't right, back it comes, no questions asked. We believe in pleasing our customers."

"I certainly appreciate it, Mr. Pathis."

CARRIN hoped the A. E. man wouldn't ask to see the kitchen. He visualized the Castile

Motors Bartender in there, like a porcupine in a dog show.

"I'm proud to say that most of the people in this neighborhood buy from us," Mr. Pathis was saying. "We're a solid firm."

"Was Mr. Miller a customer of yours?" Carrin asked.

"That fellow who killed himself?" Pathis frowned briefly. "He was, as a matter of fact. That amazed me, sir, absolutely amazed me. Why, just last month the fellow bought a brand-new Jet-lash from me, capable of doing three hundred and fifty miles an hour on a straightaway. He was as happy as a kid over it, and then to go and do a thing like that! Of course, the Jet-lash brought up his debt a little."

"Of course."

"But what did that matter? He had every luxury in the world. And then he went and hung himself."

"Hung himself?"

"Yes," Pathis said, the frown coming back. "Every modern convenience in his house, and he hung himself with a piece of rope. Probably unbalanced for a long time."

The frown slid off his face, and the customary smile replaced it. "But enough of that! Let's talk about you."

The smile widened as Pathis opened his briefcase. "Now, then, your account. You owe us two

hundred and three thousand dollars and twenty-nine cents, Mr. Carrin, as of your last purchase. Right?"

"Right," Carrin said, remembering the amount from his own papers. "Here's my installment."

He handed Pathis an envelope, which the man checked and put in his pocket.

"Fine. Now you know, Mr. Carrin, that you won't live long enough to pay us the full two hundred thousand, don't you?"

"No, I don't suppose I will," Carrin said soberly.

He was only thirty-nine, with a full hundred years of life before him, thanks to the marvels of medical science. But at a salary of three thousand a year, he still couldn't pay it all off and have enough to support a family on at the same time.

"Of course, we would not want to deprive you of necessities, which in any case is fully protected by the laws we helped formulate and pass. To say nothing of the terrific items that are coming out next year. Things you wouldn't want to miss, sir!"

Mr. Carrin nodded. Certainly he wanted new items.

"Well, suppose we make the customary arrangement. If you will just sign over your son's earnings for the first thirty years of his adult life, we can easily arrange credit for you."

MR. Pathis whipped the papers out of his briefcase and spread them in front of Carrin.

"If you'll just sign here, sir."

"Well," Carrin said, "I'm not sure. I'd like to give the boy a start in life, not saddle him with—"

"But my dear sir," Pathis interposed, "this is for your son as well. He lives here, doesn't he? He has a right to enjoy the luxuries, the marvels of science."

"Sure," Carrin said. "Only—"

"Why, sir, today the average man is living like a king. A hundred years ago the richest man in the world couldn't buy what any ordinary citizen possesses at present. You mustn't look upon it as a debt. It's an investment."

"That's true," Carrin said dubiously.

He thought about his son and his rocket ship models, his star charts, his maps. Would it be right? he asked himself.

"What's wrong?" Pathis asked cheerfully.

"Well, I was just wondering," Carrin said. "Signing over my son's earnings—you don't think I'm getting in a little too deep, do you?"

"Too deep? My dear sir!" Pathis exploded into laughter. "Do you know Mellon down the block? Well, don't say I said it, but he's already mortgaged his

grandchildren's salary for their full life-expectancy! And he doesn't have half the goods he's made up his mind to own! We'll work out something for him. Service to the customer is our job and we know it well."

Carrin wavered visibly.

"And after you're gone, sir, they'll all belong to your son."

That was true, Carrin thought. His son would have all the marvelous things that filled the house. And after all, it was only thirty years out of a life expectancy of a hundred and fifty.

He signed with a flourish.

"Excellent!" Pathis said. "And by the way, has your home got an A. E. Master-operator?"

It hadn't. Pathis explained that a Master-operator was new this year, a stupendous advance in scientific engineering. It was designed to take over all the functions of housecleaning and cooking, without its owner having to lift a finger.

"Instead of running around all day, pushing half a dozen different buttons, with the Master-operator all you have to do is push *one*! A remarkable achievement!"

Since it was only five hundred and thirty-five dollars, Carrin signed for one, having it added to his son's debt.

Right's right, he thought, walking Pathis to the door. This house

will be Billy's some day. His and his wife's. They certainly will want everything up-to-date.

Just one button, he thought. That would be a time-saver!

After Pathis left, Carrin sat back in an adjustable chair and turned on the solido. After twisting the Ezi-dial, he discovered that there was nothing he wanted to see. He tilted back the chair and took a nap.

The something on his mind was still bothering him.

"Hello, darling!" He awoke to find his wife was home. She kissed him on the ear. "Look."

She had bought an A. E. Sexitzer-negligee. He was pleasantly surprised that that was all she had bought. Usually, Leela returned from shopping laden down.

"It's lovely," he said.

She bent over for a kiss, then giggled—a habit he knew she had picked up from the latest popular solido star. He wished she hadn't.

"Going to dial supper," she said, and went to the kitchen. Carrin smiled, thinking that soon she would be able to dial the meals without moving out of the living room. He settled back in his chair, and his son walked in.

"How's it going, Son?" he asked heartily.

"All right," Billy answered listlessly.

"What'sa matter, Son?" The boy stared at his feet, not answering. "Come on, tell Dad what's the trouble."

Billy sat down on a packing case and put his chin in his hands. He looked thoughtfully at his father.

"Dad, could I be a Master Repairman if I wanted to be?"

Mr. Carrin smiled at the question. Billy alternated between wanting to be a Master Repairman and a rocket pilot. The repairmen were the elite. It was their job to fix the automatic repair machines. The repair machines could fix just about anything, but you couldn't have a machine fix the machine that fixed the machine. That was where the Master Repairmen came in.

But it was a highly competitive field and only a very few of the best brains were able to get their degrees. And, although the boy was bright, he didn't seem to have an engineering bent.

"It's possible, Son. Anything is possible."

"But is it possible for me?"

"I don't know," Carrin answered, as honestly as he could.

"Well, I don't want to be a Master Repairman anyway," the boy said, seeing that the answer was no. "I want to be a space pilot."

"A space pilot, Billy?" Leela

asked, coming in to the room. "But there aren't any."

"Yes, there are," Billy argued. "We were told in school that the government is going to send some men to Mars."

"They've been saying that for a hundred years," Carrin said, "and they still haven't gotten around to doing it."

"They will this time."

"Why would you want to go to Mars?" Leela asked, winking at Carrin. "There are no pretty girls on Mars."

"I'm not interested in girls. I just want to go to Mars."

"You wouldn't like it, honey," Leela said. "It's a nasty old place with no air."

"It's got some air. I'd like to go there," the boy insisted sullenly. "I don't like it here."

"What's that?" Carrin asked, sitting up straight. "Is there anything you haven't got? Anything you want?"

"No, sir. I've got everything I want." Whenever his son called him 'sir,' Carrin knew that something was wrong.

"Look, Son, when I was your age I wanted to go to Mars, too. I wanted to do romantic things. I even wanted to be a Master Repairman."

"Then why didn't you?"

"Well, I grew up. I realized that there were more important things. First I had to pay off the

debt my father had left me, and then I met your mother—"

Leela giggled.

"—and I wanted a home of my own. It'll be the same with you. You'll pay off your debt and get married, the same as the rest of us."

BILLY was silent for a while. Then he brushed his dark hair—straight, like his father's—back from his forehead and wet his lips.

"How come I have debts, sir?"

Carrin explained carefully. About the things a family needed for civilized living, and the cost of those items. How they had to be paid. How it was customary for a son to take on a part of his parent's debt, when he came of age.

Billy's silence annoyed him. It was almost as if the boy were reproaching him. After he had slaved for years to give the ungrateful whelp every luxury!

"Son," he said harshly, "have you studied history in school? Good. Then you know how it was in the past. Wars. How would you like to get blown up in a war?"

The boy didn't answer.

"Or how would you like to break your back for eight hours a day, doing work a machine should handle? Or be hungry all the time? Or cold, with the rain

beating down on you, and no place to sleep?"

He paused for a response, got none and went on. "You live in the most fortunate age mankind has ever known. You are surrounded by every wonder of art and science. The finest music, the greatest books and art, all at your fingertips. All you have to do is push a button." He shifted to a kindlier tone. "Well, what are you thinking?"

"I was just wondering how I could go to Mars," the boy said. "With the debt, I mean. I don't suppose I could get away from that."

"Of course not."

"Unless I stowed away on a rocket."

"But you wouldn't do that."

"No, of course not," the boy said, but his tone lacked conviction.

"You'll stay here and marry a very nice girl," Leela told him.

"Sure I will," Billy said. "Sure." He grinned suddenly. "I didn't mean any of that stuff about going to Mars. I really didn't."

"I'm glad of that," Leela answered.

"Just forget I mentioned it," Billy said, smiling stiffly. He stood up and raced upstairs.

"Probably gone to play with his rockets," Leela said. "He's such a little devil."

THE Carrins ate a quiet supper, and then it was time for Mr. Carrin to go to work. He was on night shift this month. He kissed his wife good-by, climbed into his Jet-lash and roared to the factory. The automatic gates recognized him and opened. He parked and walked in.

Automatic lathes, automatic presses—everything was automatic. The factory was huge and bright, and the machines hummed softly to themselves, doing their job and doing it well.

Carrin walked to the end of the automatic washing machine assembly line, to relieve the man there.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"Sure," the man said. "Haven't had a bad one all year. These new models here have built-in voices. They don't light up like the old ones."

Carrin sat down where the man had sat and waited for the first washing machine to come through. His job was the soul of simplicity. He just sat there and the machines went by him. He pressed a button on them and found out if they were all right. They always were. After passing him, the washing machines went to the packaging section.

The first one slid by on the long slide of rollers. He pressed the starting button on the side.

"Ready for the wash," the washing machine said.

Carrin pressed the release and let it go by.

That boy of his, Carrin thought. Would he grow up and face his responsibilities? Would he mature and take his place in society? Carrin doubted it. The boy was a born rebel. If anyone got to Mars, it would be his kid.

But the thought didn't especially disturb him.

"Ready for the wash." Another machine went by.

Carrin remembered something about Miller. The jovial man had always been talking about the planets, always kidding about going off somewhere and roughing it. He hadn't, though. He'd committed suicide.

"Ready for the wash."

Carrin had eight hours in front of him, and he loosened his belt to prepare for it. Eight hours of pushing buttons and listening to a machine announce its readiness.

"Ready for the wash."

He pressed the release.

"Ready for the wash."

Carrin's mind strayed from the job, which didn't need much attention in any case. He wished he had done what he had longed to do as a youngster.

It would have been great to be a rocket pilot, to push a button and go to Mars.

—ROBERT SHECKLEY

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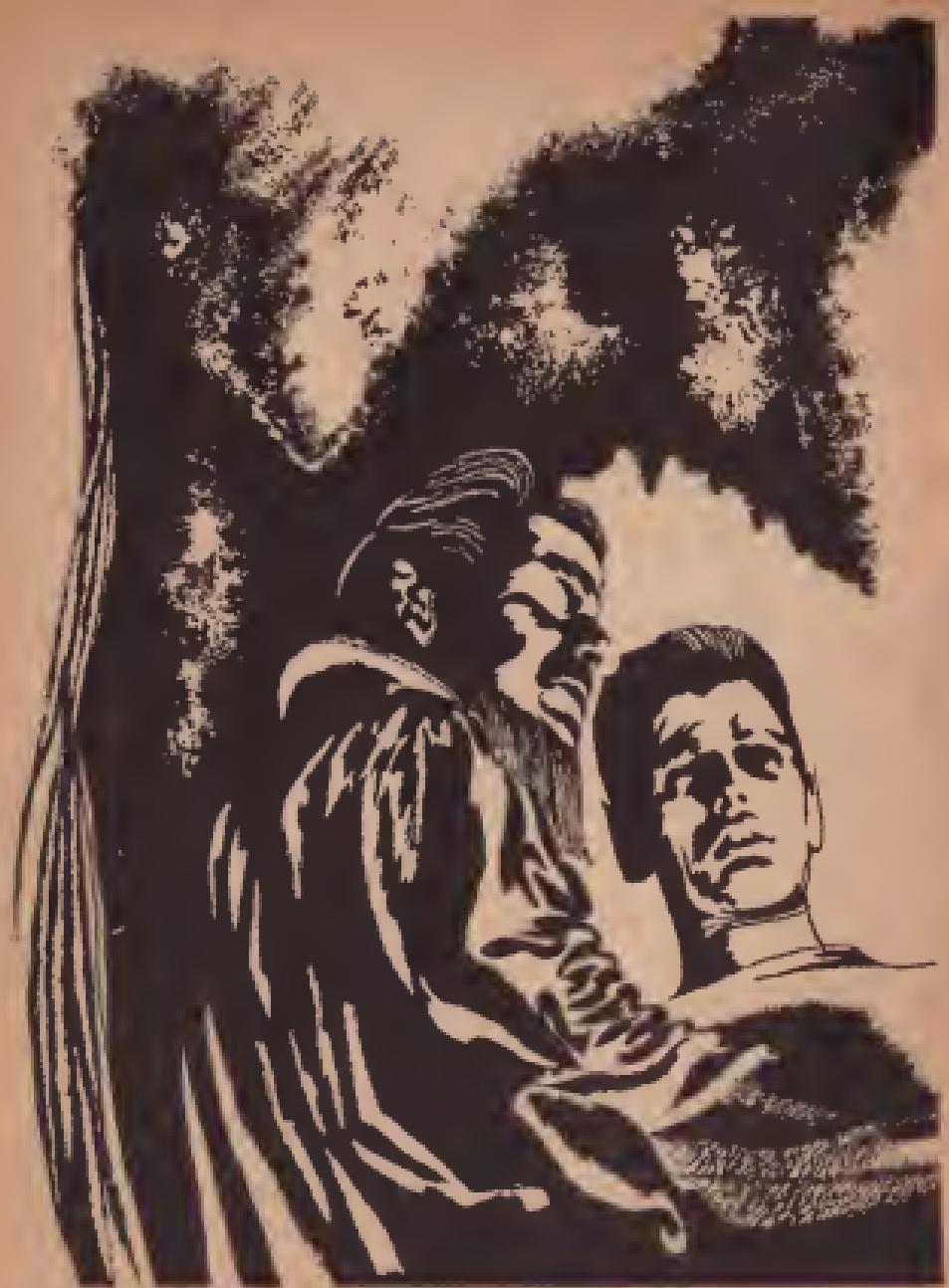
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THE DEEP

By ISAAC ASIMOV

*It's an uphill job when a race has dug down
to the cooling core of its frigid world and
must get out from under in order to survive.*

IN the end, any particular planet must die. It may be a quick death as its sun explodes. It may be a slow death as its sun sinks into decay and its oceans lock in ice. In the latter case, at least, intelligent life has a chance of survival.

The direction of survival may be outward into space, to a planet

closer to the cooling sun, or to a planet of another sun altogether. This particular avenue is closed if the planet is unfortunate enough to be the only habitable one rotating about its primary and if, at the time, no other star is within half a thousand light-years.

The direction of survival may be inward, into the crust of the



Illustrated by ASHMAN

planet. That is always available. A new home can be built underground and the heat of the planet's core can be tapped for energy. Thousands of years may be necessary for the task, but a dying sun cools slowly.

Yet planetary warmth dies, too, with time. Burrows must be dug deeper and deeper until the planet is dead through and through.

The time was coming.

On the surface of the planet, wisps of neon blew listlessly, barely able to stir the pools of oxygen that collected in the lowlands. Occasionally, during the long day, the crusted sun would flare briefly into a dull red glow and the oxygen pools would bubble a little.

During the long night, a blue-white oxygen frost formed over the pools and on the bare rock, a neon dew formed.

Eight hundred miles below the surface, a last bubble of warmth and life existed.

I

WENDA'S relationship to Roi was as close as one could imagine, closer by far than it was decent for her to know.

She had been allowed to enter the ovary only once in her life and it had been made quite clear to her that it was to be

only that once.

The Raceologist had said, "You don't quite meet the standards, Wenda, but you are fertile and that may be enough. We'll try you and see."

She wanted it to work out. She wanted it desperately. Quite early in her life, she had known that she was deficient in intelligence, that she would never be more than a Manual. It embarrassed her that she should fail the Race and she longed for even a single chance to help create another being. It became an obsession.

She secreted her egg in an angle of the structure and then returned to watch. The "randoming" process that moved the eggs gently about during mechanical insemination (to insure even gene-distribution) did not, by some good fortune, do more than make her own wedged-in egg wobble a bit.

Unobtrusively, she maintained her watch during the period of maturation, observed the little one that emerged from the particular egg that was hers, noted his physical markings, watched him grow.

He was a healthy youngster and the Raceologist approved of him.

She had said once, very casually, "Look at that one, the one sitting there. Is he sick?"

"Which one?" The Raceologist

was startled. Visibly sick infants at this stage would be a strong reflection upon his own competence. "You mean Roi? Nonsense. I wish all our young were like him."

At first, she was only pleased with herself, then frightened, finally horrified as she found herself haunting the youngster while he grew, taking an interest in his schooled, watching him at play. She was happy when he was near, dull and unhappy otherwise. She had never heard of such a thing, and she was ashamed.

SHE should have visited the Mentalist, but she knew better. She was not so dull that she didn't know this was not a mild aberration to be cured at the twitch of a brain cell. It was a truly psychotic manifestation. She was certain of that. They would confine her if they found out. They would euthanase her, perhaps, as a useless drain on the strictly limited energy available to the Race. They might even euthanase the offspring of her egg, if they found out who it was.

She fought the abnormality through the years and, to a measure, succeeded. Then she first heard the news that Roi had been chosen for the long trip, and she once again was filled with aching misery.

SHE followed him to one of the empty corridors of the cavern, some miles from the city center. The city—there was only one.

This particular cavern had been closed down within Wenda's own memory. The Elders had paced its length, considered its population and the energy necessary to keep it powered, then decided to darken it. The population—not many, to be sure—had been moved closer toward the center, and the quota for the next session at the Ovarium had been cut.

Wenda found Roi's conversational level of thinking shallow, as though most of his mind had drawn inward contemplatively.

"Are you afraid?" she thought at him.

"Because I come out here to ponder?" He hesitated a little, then admitted. "Yes, I am. It's the Race's last chance. If I fail—"

"Are you afraid for yourself?"

He looked at her in astonishment and Wenda's thought-stream fluttered with shame at her indecency.

She said, "I wish I were going instead."

"Do you think you can do a better job?"

"Oh, no. But if I were to fail and—and never come back, it would be a smaller loss to the Race."

"The loss is exactly the same,"

he said, stolidly, "whether it's you or I. The loss is Racial existence."

Racial existence at the moment was in the background of Wenda's mind, if anywhere.

She sighed. "The trip is such a long one."

"How long?" he asked with a smile. "Do you know?"

She hesitated. She dared not appear stupid to him.

She said, primly. "The common talk is that it is to the First Level."

When Wenda had been little and the heated corridors had extended farther out of the City, she had wandered out, exploring, as youngsters will. One day, a long distance out, where the chill in the air nipped at her, she came to a hall that slanted upward, but was blocked almost instantly by a tremendous plug, wedged tightly from top to bottom and side to side.

On the other side and upward, she had learned a long time later, lay the Seventy-ninth Level, above that the Seventy-eighth, and so on.

"We're going past the First Level, Wenda."

"But there's nothing beyond that!" she protested.

"You're right. Nothing. All the solid matter of the planet comes to an end."

"But, how can there be any-

thing that's nothing? You mean air?"

"No, I mean nothing. Vacuum. You know what vacuum is, don't you?"

"Yes. But vacuums have to be pumped and kept airtight."

"That's good reasoning for a Manual. Still, past the First Level there is just an indefinite amount of vacuum stretching everywhere."

Wenda thought a while. She said, "Has anyone ever been there?"

"Naturally not. But we have the records."

"Maybe the records are wrong."

"They can't be. Do you know how much space I'm going to cross?"

Wenda's thought-stream indicated an overwhelming negative.

Roi said, "You know the speed of light, I suppose?"

"Of course," she replied, readily. It was a universal constant that even Infants knew. "One thousand nine hundred and fifty-four times the length of the cavern and back in one second."

"Right," said Roi, "but if light were to travel along the distance I'm to cross, it would take it ten years."

Wenda said, "You're making fun of me. You're trying to frighten me."

"Why should it frighten you?" He rose. "Well, I've been moping

here long enough—"

For a moment, one of his six grasping limbs rested lightly in one of hers, with an objective, impassive friendship. An irrational impulse urged Wenda to seize it tightly, prevent him from leaving.

She panicked for a moment in fear that he might probe her mind past the conversational level, that he might sicken and never face her again, that he might even report her for treatment. Then she relaxed. Roi was normal, not sick like herself. He would never dream of penetrating a friend's mind any deeper than the conversational level, whatever the provocation.

He was very handsome in her eyes as he walked away. His grasping limbs were straight and strong, his prehensile, manipulative vibrissae were numerous and delicate, and his optic patches were more beautifully opalescent than any she had ever seen.

II

L AURA settled down in her seat. How soft and comfortable they made them! How pleasing and unfrightening airplanes were on the inside, so different from the hard, silvery, inhuman luster of the outside!

The bassinet was on the seat beside her. She peeped in past

the blanket and the tiny, ruffled cap. Walter was sleeping. His face was the blank, round softness of infancy and his eyelids were two fringed half-moons pulled down over his eyes.

A tuft of light brown hair straggled across his forehead and, with infinite delicacy, Laura drew it back beneath his cap.

It would soon be Walter's feeding time and she hoped he was still too young to be upset by the strangeness of his surroundings. The stewardess was being very kind. She even kept his bottles in a little refrigerator. Imagine, a refrigerator on board an airplane!

The people in the seat across the aisle had been watching her in that peculiar way that meant they would love to talk to her if only they could think of an excuse. The moment came when she lifted Walter out of his bassinet and placed him, a little lump of pink flesh encased in a white cocoon of cotton, upon her lap.

A baby is always legitimate as an opening for conversation between strangers.

The lady across the way said (her words were predictable), "What a lovely child. How old is he, my dear?"

Laura said, through the pins in her mouth (she had spread a blanket across her knees and was changing Walter), "He'll be four

months old next week."

Walter's eyes were open and he slumped across at the woman, opening his mouth in a wet, gummy grin. (He always enjoyed being changed.)

"Look at him smile, George," said the lady.

Her husband smiled back and twiddled fat fingers.

"Goo," he said.

Walter laughed in a high-pitched hiccupy way.

"What's his name, dear?" asked the woman.

"He's Walter Michael," Laura said, then added, "After his father."

The floodgates were now down. Laura learned that the couple were George and Eleanor Ellis, that they were on their vacation, that they had three children, two girls and one boy, all grown up. Both girls had married and one had two children of her own.

Laura listened with a pleased expression on her thin face. Walter (senior, that is) had always said that it was because she was such a good listener that he had first grown interested in her.

WALTER was getting restless. Laura freed his arms in order to let some of his feelings evaporate in muscular effort.

"Would you warm the bottle, please?" she asked the stewardess.

Under strict but friendly questioning, Laura explained the number of feedings Walter was currently enjoying, the exact nature of his formula, and whether he suffered from diaper rash.

"I hope his little stomach isn't upset today," she worried. "I mean the plane motion, you know."

"Oh, Lord," said Mrs. Ellis, "he's too young to be bothered by that. Besides, these large planes are wonderful. Unless I look out the window, I wouldn't believe we were in the air. Don't you feel that way, George?"

But Mr. Ellis, a blunt, straightforward man, said, "I'm surprised you take a baby that age on a plane."

Mrs. Ellis turned to frown at him.

Laura held Walter over her shoulder and patted his back gently. The beginnings of a soft wail died down as his little fingers found themselves in his mother's smooth, blonde hair and began grubbing into the loose bun that lay at the back of her neck.

She said, "I'm taking him to his father. Walter's never seen his son yet."

Mr. Ellis looked perplexed and began a comment, but Mrs. Ellis put in quickly. "Your husband is in the Service, I suppose?"

"Yes, he is."

Mr. Ellis opened his mouth in

a soundless "Oh" and subsided.

Laura went on, "He's stationed just outside Davao and he's going to be meeting me at Nichols Field."

Before the stewardess returned with the bottle, they had discovered that her husband was a master sergeant with the Quartermaster Corps, that he had been in the Army for four years, that they had been married for two, that he was about to be discharged, and that they would spend a long honeymoon in the Philippines before returning to San Francisco.

Then she had the bottle. She cradled Walter in the crook of her left arm and put the bottle to his face. It slid right past his lips and his gums seized upon the nipple. Little bubbles began to work upward through the milk, while his hands batted ineffectively at the warm glass and his blue eyes stared fixedly up at her.

Laura squeezed little Walter ever so slightly and thought how, with all the petty difficulties and annoyances that were involved, it yet remained such a wonderful thing to have a little baby all one's own.

III

THEORY, thought Gan, always theory. The folk of the surface, a million or more years

ago, could see the Universe, could sense it directly. Now, with eight hundred miles of rock above their heads, the Race could only make deductions from the trembling needles of their instruments.

It was only theory that brain cells, in addition to their ordinary electric potentials, radiated another sort of energy altogether. Energy that was not electromagnetic and hence not condemned to the creeping pace of light. Energy that was associated with the highest functions of the brain and hence characteristic only of intelligent, reasoning creatures.

It was a jogging needle that detected such an energy field leaking into their cavern, and other needles that pinpointed the origin of the field in such-and-such a direction ten light-years distant. At least one star must have moved quite close in the time since the surface-folk had placed the nearest at five hundred light-years. Or was theory wrong?

"Are you afraid?" Gan burst into the conversational level of thought without warning and impinged sharply on the humming surface of Roi's mind.

Roi said, "It's a great responsibility."

Gan thought: *Others speak of responsibility. For generations, Head-Tech after Head-Tech had been working on the Resonizer*

and the Receiving Station and it was in his time that the final step had to be taken. What did others know of responsibility?

He said, "It is. We talk about Racial extinction glibly enough, yet we *always* assume it will come some day, not now, not in our time. But it will, do you understand? *It will!* What we are to do today will consume two-thirds of our total energy supply. There will not be enough left to try again. There will not be enough for this generation to live out its life. But that will not matter if you follow orders. We have thought of everything. We have spent generations thinking of everything."

"I will do what I am told," said Roi.

"Your thought-field will be meshed against those coming from space. All thought-fields are characteristic of the individual and ordinarily the probability of any duplication is very low. But the fields from space number billions according to our best estimate. Your field is very likely to resemble one of theirs. In that case, a resonance will be set up as long as our Resonizer is in operation. Do you know the principles involved?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you know that during resonance, your mind will be on Planet X in the brain of the

creature with a thought-field identical to yours. That is not the energy-consuming process. In resonance with your mind we will also place the mass of the Receiving Station. The method of transferring mass in that manner was the last phase of the problem to be solved. It will take all the energy the Race would ordinarily use in a hundred years!"

GAN picked up the black cube that was the Receiving Station and looked at it somberly. Three generations before, it had been thought impossible to manufacture one, with all the required properties, in a space less than twenty cubic yards. They had it now; it was the size of his fist.

Gan said, "The thought-field of intelligent brain cells can only follow certain well-defined patterns. All living creatures, on whatever planet they develop, must possess a protein base and an oxygen-water chemistry. If their world is liveable for them, it is liveable for us."

Theory, thought Gan on a deeper level, always theory, never evidence that could be checked. And what if the theory was wrong?

He went on, "This does not mean that the body you find yourself in—its mind and its emotions—may not be completely alien. So we have arranged for

three methods of activating the Receiving Station. If you are strong-limbed, you need only exert five hundred pounds of pressure on any face of the cube. If you are delicate-limbed, you need only press a knob which you can reach through this single opening in the cube. If you are no-limbed, if your host body is paralyzed or in any other way helpless, you can activate the Station by mental energy alone. Once the Station is activated, we will have two points of reference, not one, and the Race can be transferred to Planet X by ordinary teleportation."

"That," said Roi, "will mean we will use electromagnetic energy."

"And so?"

"It will take us ten years to transfer."

"We will not be aware of duration."

"I realize that, sir, but it will mean the Station will remain on Planet X for ten years. What if it is destroyed in the meantime?"

"We have thought of that, too. We have thought of everything. Once the Station is activated, it will generate a para-mass field. It will move in the direction of gravitational attraction, sliding through ordinary matter, until such time as a continuous medium of relatively high density exerts sufficient friction to stop it.

It will take twenty feet of rock as we know it to do that. Anything of lower density won't affect it. It will remain twenty feet underground for ten years, at which time a counter-field will bring it to the surface. Then the Race will appear."

"In that case, why not make the activation of the Station automatic? It has so many automatic attributes already—"

"You haven't thought it through, Roi. We have. Not all spots on the surface of Planet X may be suitable. If the inhabitants are powerful and advanced, you may have to find an unobtrusive place for the Station. It won't do for us to appear in a city square, for example. And you will have to be certain that the immediate environment is not dangerous in other ways."

"What other ways, sir?"

"I don't know. The ancient records of the surface refer to many things we no longer understand. They don't explain because they took those phenomena for granted, but we have been away from the surface for almost a hundred thousand generations and we are puzzled. Our Techs aren't even in agreement on the physical nature of stars, and that is something the records mention and discuss frequently. But what are 'storms,' 'earthquakes,' 'volcanoes,' 'tornadoes,' 'sleet,' 'land-

slides,' 'floods,' 'lightning' and so on? These are all terms which refer to surface phenomena that are dangerous, but we don't know what they are. We have no idea of how to guard against them. Through your host's mind, you may be able to learn what is needful and take appropriate action."

"How much time will I have, sir?"

"The Resonizer cannot be kept in continuous operation for longer than twelve hours. I would prefer that you complete your job in two. You will return here automatically as soon as the Station is activated. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready," said Roi.

Gan led the way to the clouded glass cabinet. Roi took his seat, arranged his limbs in the appropriate depressions. His vibrissae dipped in mercury for good contact.

Roi said, "What if I find myself in a body on the point of death?"

Gan said, as he adjusted the controls, "The thought-field is distorted when a person is near death. No normal thought-field such as yours would be in resonance."

"And if it is on the point of accidental death?"

"We have thought of that, too. We can't guard against it, but the chance of death following so

quickly that you have no time to activate the Station mentally is estimated as less than one in twenty trillion, unless the mysterious surface dangers are more deadly than we expect. You have one minute."

For some strange reason, Roi's last thought before translation was of Wenda.

IV

L AURA awoke with a sudden start. What had happened? She felt as though she had been jabbed with a pin.

The afternoon sun was shining in her face and its dazzle made her blink. She lowered the shade and simultaneously bent to look at Walter.

She was a little surprised to find his eyes open. This wasn't one of his waking periods. She looked at her wristwatch. No, it wasn't. And it was a good hour before feeding time, too. She followed the demand-feeding or the "if-you-want-it-holler-and-you'll-get-it" system, but ordinarily Walter followed the clock quite conscientiously.

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Hungry, duckie?"

Walter did not respond at all and Laura was disappointed. She would have liked to have him smile. Actually, she wanted him to laugh and throw his pudgy

arms about her neck and nuzzle her and say, "Mommie," but she knew he couldn't do any of that. He could smile, though.

She put a light finger to his chin and tapped it a bit. "Goo-goo-goo-goo." He always smiled when she did that.

But he only blinked at her.

She said, "I hope he isn't sick." She looked at Mrs. Ellis in distress.

Mrs. Ellis put down a magazine. "Is anything wrong, my dear?"

"I don't know. Walter just lies there."

"Poor little thing. He's tired, probably."

"Shouldn't he be sleeping, then?"

"He's in strange surroundings. He's probably wondering what it's all about."

SHE rose, stepped across the aisle, and leaned across Laura to bring her own face close to Walter's. "You're wondering what's going on, you tiny little snookums. Yes, you are. You're saying, 'where's my nice little crib and all my nice little funnies on the wallpaper?'"

Then she made little squeaking sounds at him.

Walter turned his eyes away from his mother and watched Mrs. Ellis somberly.

Mrs. Ellis straightened sudden-

ly and looked distressed. She put a hand to her head for a moment and murmured, "Goodness! The queerest pain."

"Do you think he's hungry?" asked Laura.

"Lord," said Mrs. Ellis, the trouble in her face fading. "They let you know when they're hungry soon enough. There's nothing wrong with him. I've had three children, dear. I know."

"I think I'll ask the Stewardess to warm up another bottle."

"Well, if it will make you feel better—"

The stewardess brought the bottle and Laura lifted Walter out of his bassinette. She said, "You have your bottle and then I'll change you and then—"

She adjusted his head in the crook of her elbow, leaned over to peck him quickly on the cheek, then cradled him close to her body as she brought the bottle to his lips.

Walter screamed!

His mouth stretched open, his arms pushed before him with his fingers spread wide, his whole body as stiff and hard as though in tetany, and he screamed. It rang through the whole compartment.

Laura screamed, too. She dropped the bottle and it smashed with a white splash.

Mrs. Ellis jumped up. Half a dozen others did, too. Mr. Ellis



snapped out of a light doze.

"What's the matter?" asked Mrs. Ellis, blankly.

"I don't know. I don't know." Laura was shaking Walter frantically, putting him over her shoulder, patting his back. "Baby, baby, don't cry. Baby, what's the matter? Baby—"

The stewardess was dashing down the aisle. Her foot came within an inch of the cube that sat beneath Laura's seat.

Walter was threshing about furiously now, yelling with caliope intensity and red-faced rage.

V

ROIS mind flooded with shock. One moment he had been strapped in his chair in contact with the clear mind of Gan; the next (there was no consciousness of separation in time) he was immersed in a medley of strange, barbaric and broken thought.

He closed his mind completely. It had been open wide to increase the effectiveness of resonance, and the first touch of the alien had been—

Not painful, no. Dizzying? Nauseating? No, not that, either. There was no word.

He gathered resilience in the quiet nothingness of mind-closure and considered his position. He felt the small touch of the re-

ceiving station with which he was in mental liaison. That had come with him. Good!

He ignored his host for the moment. He might need him for drastic operations later, so it would be wise to raise no suspicions for the moment.

He explored. He entered a mind at random and took stock first of the sense-impressions that permeated it. The creature was sensitive to parts of the electromagnetic spectrum and to vibrations of the air and, of course, to bodily contact. It possessed localized chemical senses—

And that was all!

He looked again in astonishment. Not only was there no direct mass-sense, no electro-potential sense, none of the really refined interpreters of the Universe, but there was no mental contact whatever.

The creature's mind was completely isolated.

Then how did they communicate? He looked further. They had a complicated code of controlled air vibrations.

Were they intelligent? Had he chosen a maimed mind? No, they were all like that.

He filtered the group of surrounding minds through his mental tendrils, searching for a Tech, or whatever passed for such among these crippled semi-intelligences. He found a mind which

thought of itself as a controller of vehicles. A piece of information flooded Roi. He was on an airborne vehicle.

Then even without mental contact, they could build a rudimentary mechanical civilization. Or were they animal tools of real intelligences elsewhere on the planet? No, their minds said.

He plumbed the Tech. What about the immediate environment? Were the bugbears of the ancients to be feared? It was a matter of interpretation. Dangers in the environment existed. Movements of air. Changes of temperature. Water falling in the air, either as liquid or solid. Electrical discharges. There were code-vibrations for each phenomenon, but that meant nothing. The connection of any of these with the names given to phenomena by the ancestral surface-folk was a matter of conjecture.

No matter. Was there danger now? Was there danger here? Was there any cause for fear?

The Tech's mind said there wasn't.

That was enough. He returned to his host-mind and rested a moment, then cautiously expanded—

Nothing!

HIS host-mind was blank. At most there was a vague sense of warmth and a dull flicker of

undirected response to basic stimuli.

Was his host dying, after all? Aphasic? Decerebrate?

He moved quickly to the mind nearest, dredging it for information about his host, and shockingly finding it.

His host was an infant of the species.

An infant? A normal infant? And so undeveloped?

He allowed his mind to sink into and coalesce for a moment with what existed in his host. He searched for the motor areas of the brain and found them with difficulty. A cautious stimulus was followed by an erratic motion of his host's extremities. He attempted finer control and failed.

He felt anger. Had the Techs really thought of everything? Had they thought of intelligences without mental contact? Had they thought of young creatures as completely undeveloped as though they were still in the egg?

It meant, of course, that he could not, in the person of his host, activate the Receiving Station. The muscles and mind were far too weak, far too uncontrolled for any of the three methods outlined by Gan.

He thought intensely. He could scarcely expect to influence much mass through the imperfect focusing of his host's material brain

cells, but what about an indirect influence through an adult's brain. Direct physical influence would be minute; it would amount to the breakdown of the appropriate molecules of adenosine triphosphate and acetylcholine. Thereafter the adult creature would act on its own.

He hesitated to try this, afraid of failure, then cursed himself for a coward. He entered the closest mind once more. It was a female of the species and it was in the state of temporary inhibition he had noticed in others. It didn't surprise him. Minds as rudimentary as these would need periodic reapses.

He considered the mind before him now, mentally fingering the areas that might respond to stimulation. He chose one, stabbed at it, and the conscious areas flooded with life almost simultaneously. Sense impressions poured in and the level of thought rose steeply.

Good!

But not good enough. That was a mere prod, a pinch. It was no order for specific action.

He stirred uncomfortably as emotion cascaded over him. It came from the mind he had just stimulated and was directed, of course, at his host and not at him. Nevertheless, its primitive crudities annoyed him and he closed his mind against the unpleasant warmth of her uncovered feelings.

A second mind centered about his host and, had he been material or had he controlled a satisfactory host, he would have struck out in vexation.

Great Caverns, weren't they going to allow him to concentrate on his serious business?

He thrust sharply at the second mind, activating centers of discomfort, and it moved away.

He was pleased. That had been more than a simple, undefined stimulation, and it had worked nicely. He had cleared the mental atmosphere.

HE returned to the Tech who controlled the vehicle. That one would know the details concerning the surface over which they were passing.

Water?

He sorted the data quickly.

Water! And more water!

By the everlasting Levels—the word "ocean" made sense. The old, traditional word "ocean." Who would dream that so much water could exist?

But if this was "ocean," then the traditional word "island" had an obvious significance. He thrust his whole mind into the quest for geographical information. The "ocean" was speckled with dots of land, but he needed exact data—

He was interrupted by a short stab of surprise as his host moved

through space, and was held against the neighboring female's body.

Roi's mind, engaged as it was, lay open and unguarded. In full intensity, the female's emotions piled in upon him.

Roi winced. In an attempt to remove the distracting animal passions, he clamped down upon the host's brain cells through which the rawness was funneling.

He did that too quickly, too energetically. His host's mind flooded with a diffuse pain, and instantly almost every mind he could reach reacted to the air-vibrations that resulted.

In vexation, he tried to blanket the pain and succeeded only in stimulating it further.

Through the clinging mental mist of his host's pain, he tried the Tech's minds, striving to prevent contact from slipping out of focus.

His mind went icy. The best chance was almost now! He had perhaps twenty minutes. There would be other chances afterward, but not as good. Yet he dared not attempt to direct the actions of another while his host's mind was in such complete disorganization.

He retired, withdrew into mind-closure, maintaining only the most tenuous connection with his host's spinal cells, and waited.

Minutes passed and little by

little he returned to fuller liaison.

He had five minutes left.

He chose a subject.

VI

THE stewardess said, "I think he's beginning to feel a little better, poor little thing."

"He never acted like this before," insisted Laura, tearfully. "Never."

"He just had a little colic, I guess," said the stewardess.

"Maybe he's bundled up too much," suggested Mrs. Ellis.

"Maybe," agreed the stewardess. "It's quite warm."

She unwrapped the blanket and lifted the nightgown to expose a heaving abdomen, pink and bulbous. Walter was still whimpering.

The stewardess said, "Shall I change him for you? He's quite wet."

"Would you, please?"

Most of the nearer passengers had returned to their seats. The more distant ceased craning their necks.

Mr. Ellis remained in the aisle with his wife. He said, "Say, look."

Laura and the stewardess were too busy to pay him attention and Mrs. Ellis ignored him out of sheer habit.

Mr. Ellis was used to that. His remark was purely rhetorical, anyway. He bent over and tugged

at the box beneath the seat.

Mrs. Ellis looked down impatiently. She said, "Goodness, George, don't be dragging at other people's luggage like that. Sit down. You're in the way."

Mr. Ellis straightened in confusion.

Laura, with eyes still red and weepy, said, "It isn't mine. I didn't even know it was under the seat."

The stewardess, looking up from the whining baby, asked, "What is it?"

Mr. Ellis shrugged. "It's a box."

His wife said, "Well, what do you want with it, for Heaven's sake?"

Mr. Ellis groped for a reason. What did he want with it? He mumbled, "I was just curious."

The stewardess said, "There, the little boy is all nice and dry, and I'll bet in two minutes he'll just be as happy as anything. Hmm? Won't you, little funny-face?"

But little funny-face was still sobbing. He turned his head away sharply as the bottle was once more offered to him.

The stewardess said, "Let me warm it a bit. It's probably too cold for him now."

She took it and went back down the aisle.

Mr. Ellis came to a decision. Firmly, he lifted the box and balanced it on the arm of his

seat. He ignored his wife's frown.

He said, "I'm not doing it any harm. I'm just looking. What's it made of, anyway?"

HE rapped it with his knuckles. None of the other passengers seemed interested. They paid no attention to either Mr. Ellis or the box. It was as though something had switched off that particular line of interest among them. Even Mrs. Ellis, in conversation with Laura, kept her back to him.

Mr. Ellis tipped the box up and found the opening. He knew it had to have an opening. It was large enough for him to insert a finger, though there was no reason, of course, why he should want to put a finger into a strange box.

Carefully, he reached in. There was a black knob which he irrationally longed to touch. He pressed it.

The box shuddered and was suddenly out of his hands and passing through the arm of the chair.

He caught another glimpse of it moving through the floor and then there was unbroken flooring and nothing more. Slowly, he spread out his hands and stared at his palms. Dropping to his knees, he felt the floor.

The stewardess, returning with the bottle, asked politely, "Have

you lost something, sir?"

Mrs. Ellis, looking down, said, "George!"

Mr. Ellis heaved himself upward. He was flushed and flustered. He said, "The box— It slipped out and went down—"

The stewardess said, "What box, sir?"

Laura said, "May I have the bottle, miss? He's stopped crying."

"Certainly. Here it is."

Walter opened his mouth eagerly, accepting the nipple. Air bubbles moved upward through the milk and there were little swallowing sounds.

Laura looked up, radiantly. "He seems fine now. Thank you, Stewardess, and you, Mrs. Ellis. For a while there, it almost seemed as though he weren't my little boy."

"He'll be all right," said Mrs. Ellis. "Maybe it was just a bit of air-sickness. Sit down, George."

The stewardess said, "Just call me if you need me."

"Thank you," said Laura.

Mr. Ellis said, "The box—" and stopped.

What box? He didn't remember any box.

BUT one mind aboard the plane could follow the black cube as it dropped in a parabola, unimpeded by wind or air resistance, passing through the

molecules of gas that lay in its way.

Below it, the atoll was a tiny bull's-eye in a huge target. Once, during a time of war, it had boasted an airstrip and barracks. The barracks had collapsed, the airstrip was a vanishing ragged line, and the atoll was empty.

The cube struck the feathery foliage of a palm and not a frond was disturbed. It passed through



the trunk and down to the coral. It sank straight into the planet without the smallest fog of dust kicked up to tell of its entrance.

Far below the surface of the soil, the cube passed into stasis and remained motionless, mingled intimately with the atoms of compressed rock, yet remaining distinct.

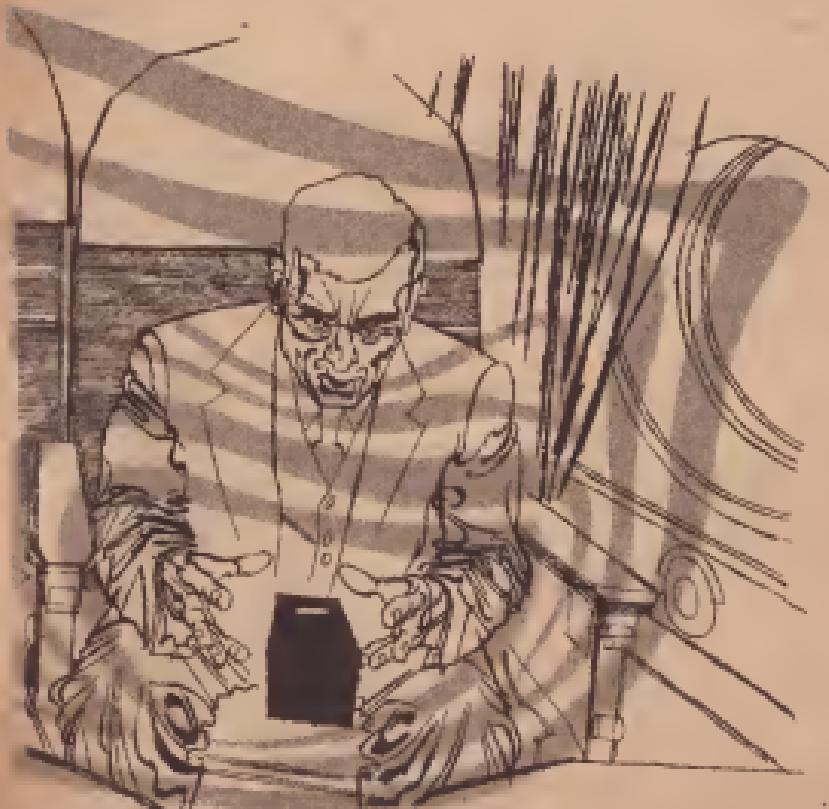
That was all. It was night, then day. It rained, the wind blew,

and the Pacific waves broke whitely on the white coral. Nothing had happened.

Nothing would happen—for ten years.

VII

"WE have broadcast the news," said Gan, "that you have succeeded. I think you ought to rest now."



Roi said, "Rest? Now? When I'm back with complete minds? Thank you, but no. The enjoyment is too keen."

"Did intelligence without mental contact bother you so much?"

"Yes," said Roi, shortly.

Gan tactfully refrained from attempting to follow the line of retreating thought.

Instead, he asked, "And the surface?"

Roi said, "Entirely horrible. What the ancients called 'sun' is an unbearable patch of brilliance overhead. It is apparently a source of light and varies periodically: 'day' and 'night,' in other words. There is also unpredictable variation."

"'Clouds,' perhaps," said Gan.

"Why 'clouds'?"

"You know the traditional phrase: 'Clouds hid the sun.' "

"You think so? Yes, it could be."

"Well, go on."

"Let's see. 'Ocean' and 'island' I've explained. 'Storm' involves wetness in the air, falling in drops. 'Wind' is a movement of air on a huge scale. 'Thunder' is either a spontaneous static discharge in the air or a great spontaneous noise. 'Sleet' is falling ice."

GAN said, "That's a curious one. Where would ice fall from? How? Why?"

"I haven't the slightest idea.

It's all very variable. It will storm at one time and not at another. There are apparently regions on the surface where it is always cold, others where it is always hot, still others where it is both at different times."

"Astonishing. How much of this do you suppose is misinterpretation of alien minds?"

"None. I'm sure of that. It was all quite plain. I had sufficient time to plumb their queer minds. Too much time, as a matter of fact."

Again his thoughts drifted back into privacy.

Gan said, "This is excellent, Roi. I've been afraid all along of our tendency to romanticize the so-called Golden Age of our surface ancestors. I felt that there would be a strong impulse among our group in favor of a new surface life."

"No," said Roi, vehemently.

"Obviously not. I doubt if the hardiest among us would consider even a day of life in an environment such as you describe with its storms, days, nights, its indecent and unpredictable variations in environment." Gan's thoughts were contented ones. "Tomorrow we begin the process of transfer. Once on the island—an uninhabited one, you say?"

"Entirely uninhabited. It was only one of that type the vessel passed over. The Tech's informa-

tion was detailed."

"Good. We will begin excavating operations. It will take generations, of course, but in the end, we will be in the Deep of a new, warm world, in pleasant caverns where the controlled environment will be conducive to the growth of every culture and refinement."

"And," added Roi, "no contact whatever with the surface creatures."

Gan said, "Why that? Primitive though they are, they might be of help to us once we establish our base. A race that can build aircraft must have some abilities."

"It isn't that. They're a belligerent lot, sir. They would attack with animal ferocity at all occasions and—"

Gan interrupted. "I am disturbed at the psycho-penumbra that surrounds your references to the aliens. There's something you are concealing."

ROI said, "I thought at first we could make use of them. If they wouldn't allow us to be friends, at least we could control them. I made one of them close the contact inside the cube and that was difficult. Very difficult. Their minds are basically different."

"In what way?"

"If I could describe it, the

difference wouldn't be basic. But I can give you an example. I was in the mind of an infant. They don't have masturbation chambers. The infants are in the charge of individuals. The creature who was in charge of my host—" He stopped in disgust.

"Yes?" Gan encouraged.

"She—it was a female—felt a special tie to the young one. There was a sense of ownership, of a relationship that excluded the remainder of their society. I seemed to detect dimly something of the emotion that binds a man to an associate or friend, but it was far more intense and unrestrained."

"Well," said Gan, "without mental contact, they probably have no real conception of society, and sub-relationships may build up. Or was this one pathological?"

"No, no. It's universal. The female in charge was the infant's mother."

"Impossible! It's own mother?"

"Of necessity. The infant had passed the first part of its existence inside its mother. *Physically inside!* The creatures' eggs remain within the body. They are fertilized within the body. They grow within the body and emerge alive."

"Great Caverns!" Gan said, weakly. His own sense of revulsion was as strong as Roi's. "Then

each creature would know the identity of its own child! Each child would have a specific father!"

"And he would be known, too. My host was being taken five thousand miles, as nearly as I could judge the distance, to be seen by its father."

"Unbelievable!"

"Do you need more to realize that there can never be any meeting of minds? The difference is too fundamental, too complete."

The yellowness of regret tinged and roughened Gan's thought-train. He said, "It would be too bad. I had thought—"

"What, sir?"

"I had thought that for the first time there would be two intelligences helping one another. I had thought that together we might progress more quickly than

either could alone. Even if they were primitive technologically, as they are, technology isn't everything. I had thought we might still be able to learn from them."

"Learn what?" asked Roi, brutally. "To know our parents and make friends of our children?"

Gan said, "No, no! You're quite right. The barrier between us must remain forever complete. They will have the surface and we the Deep, and so it will be."

OUTSIDE the laboratories, Roi met Wenda.

Her thoughts were concentrated pleasure. "I'm glad you're back."

Roi's thoughts were pleasurable, too. It was very restful to make clean mental contact with a friend.

—ISAAC ASIMOV

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